Implementing indigenous languages in education in Francophone Africa: examining ways and means in Burkina Faso

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IMPLEMENTING INDIGENOUS LANGUAGES IN EDUCATION IN FRANCOPHONE AFRICA : EXAMINING WAYS AND MEANS IN BURKINA-FASO

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Abstract

Experiments with indigenous languages as medium of instruction have been ongoing in francophone Africa. These experiments have not been generalized to all schools by educational authorities and have been limited to the first few years of primary education. A more generalized approach to using indigenous languages as medium of instruction can contribute to improve the outcomes of education. However, when is such a development likely to occur and which languages should be chosen? This article explores these questions using the case of Burkina Faso as an example. We show that it will be practically possible to use a limited number of indigenous languages as medium of instruction, rather than all languages spoken in the country. In order to do so, we introduce an approximate assessment of which languages are easy to learn and to teach, for speakers of which other languages. We demonstrate that a gradual transition towards indigenous languages will become a necessity if the present trend of increased participation in education continues into the future. In order for this to happen, careful planning and preparation will be essential; we conclude with a brief examination of what such planning and preparation might consist of.

Keywords: Burkina Faso, Education, Medium of instruction, Local languages, Francophone Africa

Résumé

Les langues locales ont été utilisées comme langues d'enseignement en Afrique francophone par le passé et le sont toujours aujourd'hui. Cependant, ces expériences ne se sont pas généralisées sur la plupart des écoles et ont rarement dépassé les premières années de l'enseignement primaire. Une utilisation plus généralisée des langues locales comme langues d'enseignement pourrait contribuer à améliorer le rendement du système éducatif des pays francophones. Cependant, l'on pourrait se poser la question de savoir quand est-ce qu'une telle évolution est susceptible de se produire et quelles pourraient être les langues à choisir pour y parvenir ? C'est cette question que le présent article traite en utilisant le cas spécifique du Burkina Faso comme exemple. L'article propose qu'un nombre de langues indigènes soit progressivement utilisé comme langues d'enseignement,

plutôt que de tenter d'introduire toutes les langues du pays en même temps. Pour ce faire, nous tentons une évaluation approximative des langues plus faciles à apprendre et à enseigner par les locuteurs d'autres langues. L'utilisation progressive des langues locales sera une nécessité si la tendance évolutive actuelle des taux de scolarisation se poursuit. Pour cela, il faut une planification et une préparation minutieuses et une brève analyse de ce que cela pourrait entraîner.

Mot-clés : Burkina Faso, education, langue d'enseignement, langues locales, Afrique francophone

Introduction

For a long time, the standard medium of instruction in education in francophone Africa has been French. However, partly under the influence of some African and French authors such as Ki-Zerbo (1990, 1991, 2010), Somé (2003) and Chaudenson (2006), this has started to change. (See Albaugh, 2014, for one analysis of how and why this change came about.) In more and more countries of Francophone Africa, indigenous languages are being introduced as medium of instruction primary education systems. A good illustration is the case of the French-sponsored ELAN initiative, carried out under the umbrella of the OIF (Organisation Internationale de la Francophonie).[44] In fact, the reason for the introduction of indigenous languages in education is partly due to the disappointing results of education that only uses French-as medium of instruction (Napon 2001, Ki-Zerbo 2010). It is now recognized, for example through the work of Chaudenson (2006) that the most efficient way of helping children reach a reasonable level of French is by providing initial literacy skills in their 'mother tongue' or L1 (Nikiema and Kabore-Pare, 2010). This reasoning of course retains a neo-colonial element: it means that indigenous languages are instrumentalized for the purpose of teaching people to use French and not treated as valuable avenues to knowledge acquisition and production in their own right. In order for that to happen, it would be necessary to develop indigenous languages for use beyond the initial stages of primary education. But how likely is it in practice, that such a development will take place? And even if it would take place, which indigenous languages should be used? Those are the questions we seek answers to in this article, with a focus on a specific case, the case of Burkina Faso.

Generally, when it comes to using indigenous languages in education or other formal domains in Africa, two fundamental positions can clearlybe distinguished. One position, taken for example by Sawadogo (2004: 258) is that all learners should be able to learn, to read and write, in the language or languages they are most familiar with. The main problem with this approach is that it makes implementation very difficult, especially in Africa due to the fact that this continent has a great many languages, many of them with small numbers of speakers. This is a problem that has remained unsolved to this day. The other position, taken for example by Maïga, Napon and Soré (2015: 75)

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[44] https://elan-afrique.org/ accessed 20 October 2021.

is that a more limited number of languages could be used, especially those that are useful for communication for social and economic purposes outside of family circles. That approach is potentially easier to implement, but has the problem of which languages should be chosen – and why. We believe the second approach is the more practical of the two; the purpose of this paper is to take stock of the current state of the argument and to take it one step further bysuggesting solutions to the problems associated with this second approach.Our starting point is one of the proponents of this second approach, Maxime Somé (2003), who argues for the introduction of indigenous education as medium of instruction in primary education and for teaching French as a subject at that level. He also considers which indigenous languages should be used and at which level. In this article, we will first revisit the proposals of Somé, then look at the educational situation of Burkina Faso today to assess the relevance of his analysis and lastly, use recent theoretical insights to discuss the future role of indigenous languages as medium of instruction in education.

I. EDUCATION IN BURKINA FASO AROUND THE YEAR 2000.

In his analysis, Somé (2003) points to the poor state of education in Burkina Faso: enrolment in primary education is low (and fewer girls than boys were enrolled: according to UNESCO statistics for the year 2000, the enrolment ratio for boys was 52%, versus 37% for girls.). Children who do go to school often have to repeat classes, there is a very high dropout rate, schools are overcrowded and ill-equipped and rural schools are much worse off than those in the urban centres. Graph I below (designed using UNESCO statistics) gives the same overall picture: in 2000 the Burkinabé educational system reached only a small part of the population, more boys than girls, and was highly selective.
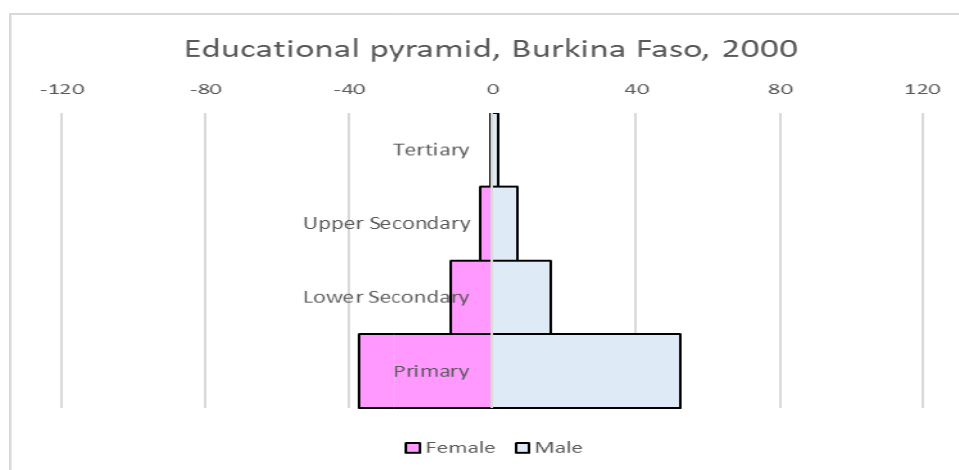
Graph 1: GER, Burkina Faso, 2000 (tertiary education: 1999)[45]

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[45] The indicator used here is the Gross Enrolment Ratio (GER) in education. This ratio is the total enrolment within a country 'in a specific level of education, regardless of age, expressed as a percentage of the population in the official age group corresponding to this level of education' (UNESCO 2009: 9).

Somé sharply criticized this system. He pointed to the inequality inherent in it: rural schools are less well off than urban schools; children of rich parents have far better chances than children of poor parents, because they can give their children a headstart in French. This analysis is similar to the one made by Nikiema and Kabore-Pare (2010) and Trudell (2012). In his analysis, the Burkinabé education at that time represented a waste of already scarce resources: an illiterate population is likely to be economically less productive than a literate population; high repetition and dropout rates put a drain on an already overstretched school system. Somé felt that this could be solved by using indigenous languages in education and changing over to French as medium of instruction only at the end of primary education or in secondary school. French would then be taught in primary school as a second language.

In order to turn these general thoughts into practical proposals, Somé tried to assess which languages to use, and proposed a four-tiered hierarchy, starting with languages spoken at 'departmental' level, then those that could be used at provincial level, then those that could be used at regional level. He proposed to keep French (the fourth tier) at the official level, for national and international use (p 251). However, he felt that at least the regional languages should also be used outside of education, for example in the sub-national levels of administration and in courts. Somé pointed out that using the three main languages of the country (Mooré, Dioula and Fulani) would be too limited and felt that more study would be needed to come to a decision on the regional languages – in his proposal, at least six, but possibly 11 languages would be needed (p 285). Primary education would start using a departmental language as medium of instruction, then move to French towards the end of primary education and at higher levels (p 196). Provincial and regional languages would be taught as subjects at all levels. Somé saw a link between language and culture and pointed out how using indigenous languages would be a necessary condittion for implementing a democratic and culturally appropriate development process. But this was around the year 2000. Let's briefly examine what has changed since then and what the situation in the country is nowadays.

2. EDUCATION IN BURKINA FASO IN 2020.

Over the past 20 years, Burkina Faso has made great steps in improving the participation (in terms of numbers) in education at all levels, as illustrated in graph 2 below.
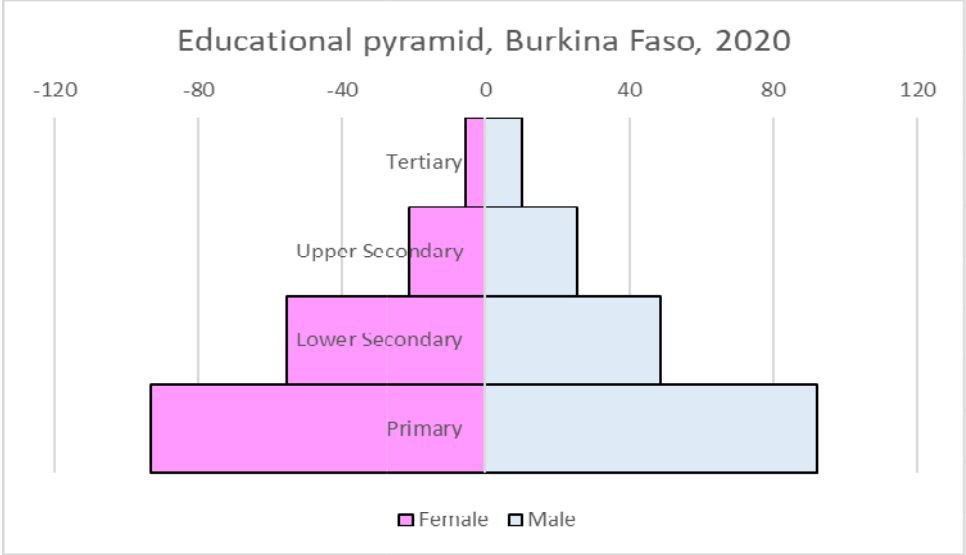
Graph 2: GER, Burkina Faso, 2020

As is clear from the graph, primary education is now almost universal in Burkina Faso and the GER in tertiary education has increased to nearly 8%. More girls than boys now participate in primary and lower secondary education; after that, boys still dominate. Nevertheless, even though participation has increased greatly, the strongly selective nature of the Burkinabé education system has remained unchanged. Moreover, the number of dropouts has worsened: UNESCO gives the 'survival rate to the last grade of primary education' of Burkina Faso for 2000 as 61%. This dropped to 54% for 2019. Such a drop is not a universal phenomenon all over Africa: by comparison, for Morocco[46] the survival rate improved from 73% in 2000 to 95% in 2019. Another relevant statistic in this context is the 'completion rate' as provided by UNESCO, which shows what percentage of children actually complete their primary education. In Morocco, this has increased from estimates of 50% in 2000 to more than 81% in 2020. In Burkina Faso, it has increased as well, going from an estimated meagre 19% in 2000 to almost 44% in 2020. So even though the percentage of dropouts increased in Burkina Faso, the number of children who managed to complete their primary education increased as well. Overall, though, the levels are low compared to those of other countries. This is of course not due to the fact that Burkinabè children are less clever than Moroccan children: it is due to factors related to the education system of the country – the medium of instruction being part of that.

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[46] Morocco was chosen for comparison because some developments we think will take place in Burkina Faso in future are already taking place in Morocco; more on that further down in this article.

Contrary to what Somé believed would be possible, the expansion has been achieved whilst keeping French as medium of instruction throughout the Burkinabé education system. Over the years, there have been recurrent experiments with bilingual education. Thus, Burkina Faso, together with seven other Francophone countries, was part of the ELAN initiative. In Burkina Faso, it supported the introduction of local-language teaching in nine languages in the first few years of primary education in a limited number of schools in the country.[47] At the time of Somé, a consortium of NGOs, together with a number of French agencies was sponsoring experiments with using indigenous languages as means of instruction (p 168). Currently, Burkina Faso has a Plan for education and training (PSEF), for the 2017-2030 period. This plan calls for an increase in the number of 'bilingual' schools in the country (p 87), but is silent on how this is to be achieved.

All of this means that Burkina Faso, like the rest of Sub-Sahara Francophone Africa, is still far away from the introduction of local languages in education in indigenous languages beyond the first few years of primary education. The problems as described by Somé still remain: an educational system that wastes scarce resources and does not provide Burkinabé children with the education they deserve and the country needs. Can we come a step closer towards solving the problem by using some recent new insights? We believe this is possible, firstly by looking at the issue of which languages to use and secondly by considering when the current education system will reach its limits.

3. WHICH INDIGENOUS LANGUAGES SHOULD BE USED AS MEDIUM OF INSTRUCTION?

Even though there seems to be no unanimity on the number of languages spoken, the Ethnologue, one of the most often-quoted sources in this domain, puts the number of indigenous living languages spoken in Burkina Faso at 66[48] whereas the ELAN website mentions 59 languages. These are the languages that, in principle, should be used as medium of instruction at the start of primary education. However, as Somé has already suggested, it should be possible to change to a related, but easy to acquire language after a few years. In order to understand why this is thinkable and possible, we use the distinction as proposed by Van Pinxteren (2021) between what he calls *discerned* and *designed* languages. The concept 'discerned' points to the act of discerning: discerned languagesare speech forms, registers or dialects that are so different from one another that there is justification for the socio-political act of pronouncing a dialect to be a separate language. The concept *'designed'* points to the act of extending a spoken language into a standardized language, including its written form. This is similar to the concept of 'intellectualisation'. Prah (2017: 216) quotes the definition of Sibayan (1999): an intellectualised language is a 'language which can be used for educating a person in any field of knowledge from kindergarten to the university and beyond'. The word 'designed' reinforces the notion that there is a social process involved here. This reinforcement is intentional. Many languages (including French, Modern Standard Arabic or Turkish) have an explicit and strong design element to them.

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[47] https://elan-afrique.org/quelles-actions-menees-page/burkina-faso accessed 20 October 2021.

[48] https://www-ethnologue-com/country/BF accessed 20 October 2021.

It is illustrative to look at what this distinction means in practice, for example in a country like Morocco. For Morocco, the Ethnologue lists ten indigenous living languages[49] that are spoken in the country. Yet, education is not provided in these ten discerned languages. Instead, primary education is provided in Modern Standard Arabic and in Standard Moroccan Tamazight. These standardized forms of language are actually *spoken* by almost nobody in the country, but they are being used in many formal domains.[50] It is important to note that in order to master a designed language, a certain amount of formalized learning is always required. A *designed* language is not wholly identical to anybody's mother tongue. Still, it makes more sense in Morocco to use Modern Standard Arabic as a common designed language, as opposed to using for example Spanish. The situation is similar in China, where Mandarin Chinese is used as the *designed* language that serves a large number of *discerned* languages.

Applied to Burkina Faso, this means that in principle, the problem of 'too many languages' as signaled above could be less severe than it seems a first sight: in Burkina Faso, as in other countries, a limited number of *designed* or intellectualized languages could serve a larger number of *discerned* languages. But why and how should such a limited number be chosen? We suggest that such a choice should be based on principles that are both scientifically sound and that respect the equal human rights of all citizens. These principles are:

- Make use of **existing bilingualism** as a resource. There could be situations where finding an appropriate designed language for discerned language 'A' is difficult or impractical, but if those children also speak language 'B' it might be possible to find a cost-effective, inclusive solution.
- In line with the arguments developed above, the aim should be to arrive at a **limited number** of designed languages for education – as suggested by multiple authors, such as Somé (2003) but also for example Chumbow (2005: 177).
- These designed languages should be chosen in such a way that they are **easy to learn** for as many speakers of discerned languages as possible. This principle was already suggested by Nwoye (1978), as cited by Laitin (1992: 154).
- Strive for **inclusivity**: choose the various designed languages in such a way that, as much as possible, all have to exert a relatively low but relatively equal effort to learn them. This is related to the idea of Kymlicka (2003: 150), who feels that all citizens should have equal access to state institutions, without linguistic barriers imposed on some but not on others.
- **Build incentives for linguistic collaboration** among related communities.

[49] https://www-ethnologue-com/country/MA/languages accessed 26 October 2021: Hassanyya, Judeo-Moroccan Arabic, Darija, standard Arabic, Ghomara, Senhaja, Tachelhit, Central Shilha, Tarifit, Taznatit.

[50] Thus, the website of the Prime Minister of Morocco is available in Arabic, French and Tamazight: https://www.cg.gov.ma/amz accessed 26 October 2021.

These principles are all related in some way to the idea that using a designed language not only in the spoken form, but also for reading and writing always involves some degree of learning. Reading and writing a designed language needs to be taught in schools. If nearly everybody in a country should be given the ability to use one or more designed languages, then teaching and learning those languages should be made as easy as possible. How can that be achieved ?

The issue of which languages require more or less effort (are 'easier' or 'more difficult' to teach and to learn) and for whom has not received wide attention in the literature. There are two ways of looking at ease and difficulty of language learning: one can look at it from an absolute and from a relative perspective. An absolute perspective would be that of the proverbial visitor from Mars, who might want find out what the common features are of human language and which languages are outliers in that respect. In practical terms, however, a relative perspective will always be more useful. This means that one looks at which languages are easy or difficult to learn for speakers of which mother tongue. Thus, Mandarin Chinese might be difficult to learn for native French speakers, but easy to learn for speakers of Cantonese (and vice versa). In the literature about language learning, the relevance of this difference between languages that are easy to learn (and to teach) and difficult is almost always omitted. Van Pinxteren (2020 : 137) points out: 'this is a question of key relevance for Africa, where populations are supposed to be taught in a language that most learners do not speak from birth.'

Van Pinxteren has quoted US experience in teaching foreign languages, which shows that there is considerable difference in learning 'easy' or 'difficult' languages to a reasonable level: for a talented American learner, the difference can vary between 10 weeks of full-time instruction for a 'very easy' language to more than 80 weeks for a 'very difficult' language. As an approximation, Van Pinxteren has benchmarked a U.S. scheme to scores of language distance (Levenshtein or Normalized Edit distances) that can be calculated through the Automated Similarity Judgement Program (ASJP).[51] This leads him to a classification of ease of language learning that relates ASJP distance scores to categories of ease or difficulty of language learning, going from very easy to very difficult, as follows (taken from Van Pinxteren 2020: 141):

ASJP distance	Category
< 60	Very easy
≥ 60, < 90	Easy
≥ 90, ≤ 95	Medium
> 95, < 100	Difficult
≥ 100	Very difficult

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[51] https://asjp.clld.org/ (accessed 6 January 2021). For more information, also look at their Wiki page: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Automated_Similarity_Judgment_Program.

A categorization based on these scores has its limitations, because it does not fully take account of differences in sounds and tones between languages or stricter or less strict grammatical rules of languages. Thus, languages 'X' and 'Y'might form an easy language pair in this categorization. Still, due to differences in sounds or in grammar, it might be easier for speakers of language 'X' to learn language 'Y' than the other way around. Therefore, any suggestions for language choices based on these categorizations would need to be validated through expert linguistic knowledge.

For Burkina Faso, it is important to note that French is either a 'difficult' or 'very difficult' language for almost all speakers of a Burkinabé language.[52] However, the combination between French and a Burkinabé language is not the only difficult combination in the country. This is due to the fact that the indigenous Burkinabé languages belong to different language families. Thus, for a speaker of Mooré, Dioula is a difficult language to learn (and vice-versa). Therefore, any attempt to introduce one of the current Burkinabé languages as the national language (as was done with Swahili in Tanzania) is bound to meet resistance from other language communities, who would then rather invest their time in learning French. Thus, as already proposed by Somé, Burkina Faso will have to employ multiple languages. But which language choices would be best and why? A first indication can be given by looking at the ASJP scores for language pairs of the various language (sub)families.

Table 1 gives the scores for the 16 Mande languages discerned by the ASJP database for Burkina Faso. The most important of these, in terms of current number of speakers, is Dioula. As is clearly noticeable from the table, the Mande language family is internally diverse: there is not one discerned language that would be easy to learn for all speakers of Mande languages in the country. If the ASJP distances accurately reflect the situation on the ground, the language that comes closest would be Seeku. It seems to be easy (though not *very* easy) to learn for speakers of 14, other Mande languages. The only exception would be the Matya Samo language; however, the speakers of this language are mostly bilingual and also speak either Mooré or Dioula.

This fact – the fact that many speakers of one Mande language also speak other Mande languages - points to another element that comes into sight when using the concepts of discerned and designed language. It is thinkable that one or more standardized (or designed) varieties of a Mande language could be developed in such a way that it becomes easier to learn for speakers of a larger number of discerned Mande languages. Thus, one of the greatest successes of designed languages in the world today is Indonesian (Bahasa Indonesia), a designed language based on but not identical to Malay. It is currently used as first or second language by over 150 million people. In Bahasa, to give an example, the plural is not marked – to make a word plural, it is repeated. In general, Bahasa was consciously formed to make it as easy as possible to learn for as many people as possible, making it different from related but much more complex languages such as Javanese.

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[52] This means that the ASJP scores between any Burkinabé language and French are all above 95. The assessments of easy or difficult language pairs are all based on the benchmarked ASJP scores computed by the authors as extracted from the full ASJP database. (Wichmann, Holman & Brown (eds.). 2020).

Mande languages are spoken over a large area, with a total speaker base of around 40 million people. Especially for the Western Mande languages, it would be conceivable to develop one of these languages into a designed language that could serve a large speaker base in a number of Francophone countries, including Senegal, Mali and Ivory Coast. Bisa and Dioula are Mande languages that have been taught in primary schools under the ELAN project.

2 SYNONYMS, AT LEAST 28 WORDS, DATE > 1700
LOANWORDS EXCLUDED

LDND	BISA{	SAMO_	SAMO_	SAMO_	SOUTH	BLE{M	BOLON	DZUUN	DZUUN	JOWUL	JULA_	MARKA	SEEKU	SEEKU	SOUTH	SOUTH
BISA{Man.EASTERN_MANDE|Nig	0															
SAMO_MATYA{Man.EASTERN_MAN	81	0														
SAMO_MATYA_2{Man.EASTERN_M	72	45	0													
SAMO_MAYA{Man.EASTERN_MAND	71	68	54	0												
SOUTHERN_SAMO{Man.EASTERN_	69	65	70	70	0											
BLE{Man.WESTERN_MANDE|Nige	85	93	92	95	91	0										
BOLON{Man.WESTERN_MANDE|Ni	93	88	93	92	91	81	0									
DZUUNGOO{Man.WESTERN_MANDE	92	94	95	95	93	86	90	0								
DZUUNGOO_2{Man.WESTERN_MAN	92	93	94	95	90	87	92	46	0							
JOWULU{Man.WESTERN_MANDE|N	96	93	92	93	94	91	85	95	94	0						
JULA_VEHICULAIRE{Man.WESTE	90	93	91	92	97	73	52	94	92	84	0					
MARKA{Man.WESTERN_MANDE|Ni	92	86	88	91	94	75	47	93	91	86	55	0				
SEEKU{Man.WESTERN_MANDE|Ni	89	85	85	92	86	84	73	78	86	86	84	84	0			
SEEKU_3{Man.WESTERN_MANDE|	90	87	85	94	87	88	81	82	86	91	91	89	30	0		
SOUTHERN_BOBO_MADARE{Man.W	89	94	93	94	92	90	89	94	94	83	84	89	88	85	0	
SOUTHERN_BOBO_MADARE_2{Man	95	96	97	97	94	94	87	95	95	83	92	90	86	83	34	0
LDND	BISA{	SAMO_	SAMO_	SAMO_	SOUTH	BLE{M	BOLON	DZUUN	DZUUN	JOWUL	JULA_	MARKA	SEEKU	SEEKU	SOUTH	SOUTH

Table 1: Mande languages

The situation is more complex for the Gur languages, of which Mooré is the most important – an overview is provided in table 2 below. The Gur language family is internally at least as diverse as the Mande family; there is not one language that is easy to learn for all Gur-speakers. However, with three languages, it would be possible to have a solution for most of the speakers of Gur languages in Burkina Faso. For example, one could use Mooré, Gourmanchema and Sisaala, but other choices would be possible as well and might be more logical once existing levels of bilingualism are taken into account. Gur languages taught in primary school under the ELAN project were Mooré, Gourmanchema, Dagara, Kasem, Lyele and Nuni.

Table 2: Gur languages of Burkina Faso

Fula is not easy to learn for speakers of any of the other Burkinabé languages. It has a speaker base of over 1 million in the country and could be developed as medium of instruction in its own right. In addition, there are small communities of speakers of languages that have a larger speaker base in surrounding countries, such as Tamasheq, Zarma and speakers of several Dogon languages. Many of these might be bilingual.

What this means is that the four-tiered language proposals by Somé could be greatly simplified in light of the insights presented above. Firstly, it is conceivable that by working with '*very easy*' to learn languages (analogous to what is done in Morocco), the number that could be offered at the start of primary education could be considerably lower than the number of 66 discerned by the Ethnologue.

Secondly, by concentrating on designed languages that are *'easy'* to learn, it might be possible to skip the idea of using provincial languages and to select a limited number of regional languages instead. The number could be restricted to around five easy to learn languages (one Mande language, three Gur languages and Fula), together with French. At any rate, our theoretical approach, although better and more refined than what Somé had available, is still not sufficient for proposing a final choice: this would have to be done on the basis of Burkinabé linguisticand other expertise and would also require consultation of the communities involved.

One might argue that working with fewer than 66 languages would not sufficiently take the different cultural traditions in the country into account. However, the idea of one 'tribe', one 'language' one 'culture' has been criticized as a Euro-centric view many years ago, starting with the work of Vansina (1990). There is a related point made by Van Pinxteren (2021: 257); he has made an analysis using the techniques of cross-cultural psychology; the three Burkinabé ethnolinguistic groups included in that analysis (Bissa, Gourmanche and Moore) all fall into the same cultural cluster. It may be that his analysis is too coarse – on the other hand, the trope that Burkina Faso is a mosaic of endless cultural diversity, if it ever was correct, does not do justice to the years of change caused by the colonial and postcolonial periods. So also from that point of view, working with a few, easy to learn languages might provide an appropriate solution. Currently, the language(s) teachers speak are not taken into account in decisions on posting teachers to schools in the country: all are supposed to be able to teach in French. This system would have to change: teachers posted to a school where, for example, Mooré is used as medium of instruction should have a sufficient knowledge of Mooré in order to be able to teach there.

We have shown, then, that it would be practically possible to introduce indigenous languages in primary education in Burkina Faso, in a way that would be simpler than the four-tiered language proposals made by Somé 20 years ago as discussed above. This would be in line with the stated educational policies of the country. It is also likely, as many authors have argued, to decrease the dropout rate and the wastage of talent and resources that characterize the current educational system. It would lead to more and better educated children at lower cost, thus providing a double benefit to the economy of the country. This is in line with what has been found in other parts of the world: Grin (2003) has looked at multilingualism in education in Western countries, notably Canada and Switzerland, and has given an economic analysis. One of his conclusions (p39) is that 'the application of basic economic concepts then suggests that society is likely to be best off not when it tries to eliminate diversity, nor when it attempts to embrace limitless diversity.'

4. EXPLORING THE LIMITS OF THE CURRENT EDUCATIONAL SYSTEM

What would it mean for the education system if many more children than at present were to get quality education? What if the participation in all levels of education would continue to grow, to reach the level currently reached by Morocco, and beyond, to reach the level currently reached by France and other countries of the global North?

Somé believed that it would be possible to continue teaching in French in secondary school and beyond. Somé could safely make that statement, because it was true in his context at that time, and perhaps is still true today. Butwhat will the future look like in such circumstances?

For that, it is important to realize that learning *any* designed or formalized language is too difficult for a small group of children. 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 these children either cannot learn to read or write or if so, only to a very limited level. This means that around 99% of all children can acquire basic reading and writing skills. The number of people who are or can become 'literate' in the sense that they can no longer be considered 'functionally illiterate' is smaller. 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 ANLCI, 7% out of all French between 18 and 65 years old are functionally illiterate[53]; so even with the best education available, not all children can learn 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. What this means, then, is that some children learn more quickly than others.

For language learning, it is important to note that IQ is not one-dimensional. There are different, although interrelated, forms of intelligence. Li (2016) has shown that language aptitude is one form of intelligence. It is related to, but independent of general intelligence. What this means is that some children may learn languages quickly and easily, but they may have great difficulty with maths. For others, it may be the other way round. Then also, of course, some children are either easy learners or have difficulty with both types of subjects.

For Africa in general, these simple facts have tremendous consequences, although they are usually overlooked. For the top end of the intelligence scale, language of instruction does not matter. In Europe, elite education for a long time was in Latin or in other languages other than the mother tongue. In India, Sanskrit has been used as a medium of instruction for centuries. In Africa, the use of colonial languages did not block the emergence of great intellectuals. So as long as education remains restricted to forming a small elite, there will be no problem. However, as argued above, this will change as soon as the SDG goal of 'education for all' will be taken seriously. For those children who are not at the top of the intelligence scale, language of instruction does matter.Learning a foreign language to a level high enough to be able to profit from more and more advanced instruction in that language takes time and effort. Lower language aptitude means more effort is required. Under colonial education systems, it was not necessary to worry about the language of instruction – any language of convenience

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[53] http://www.anlci.gouv.fr/Illettrisme/Les-chiffres/Niveau-national

could serve equally well. As education expands, this is bound to change. But at what level of enrolment in education is such a change likely to occur, if at all?

Theoretically, the following questions need to be answered:

- What percentage of the population can an education system educate to a reasonable level of proficiency in a 'foreign' designed language?
- What percentage of the population is an education system expected to provide with secondary and tertiary education?

As long as in Francophone Africa Faso percentage 'A' is greater than percentage 'B' there will be no problem in providing tertiary education in French. If, on the other hand, percentage 'B' becomes greater than percentage 'A', French-language education will not be an option for all of that education. This point is so important that it merits repeating the same in different words: if the Burkinabé education system will educate **fewer** people than the number of people it can teach formalized French to the required level, then it can use French as medium of instruction. However, as soon as the Burkinabé education system is expected to educate **more** people than the number it can teach, a formalized (designed) French, then it can no longer make exclusive use of French as medium of instruction. Now, let us make this statement more precise, by clarifing what we mean by levels of education and by 'the required level' of language knowledge.

To be clear in our terminology, we follow the International Standard Classification of Education (ISCED) 2011 scheme, as developed by UNESCO (2012). According to this scheme, 'tertiary education' is comprised of ISCED levels 5 through to 8. Level 8 stands for 'doctoral or equivalent level', whereas level 5 stands for 'short cycle tertiary education', not to be confused with level 4, which stands for 'post-secondary non-tertiary education'. It is important to note that in this scheme, 'tertiary education' refers to more than what is commonly understood as university education. It also includes education for example by polytechnics at the higher vocational level. Secondary education comprises ISCED levels 2 and 3 – in Burkina Faso, this corresponds to the 'collège', 'Lycée' and the 'enseignement secondaire'. Technical and vocational education and training (TVET) generally is at levels 3 and 4. Primary education, leading up to the 'Certificat d'Études Primaires' then corresponds to ISCED level 1.

Several systems are used internationally for assessing the level of proficiency in a language. One of the more common ones is the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR), which has six levels. [54] We do not have clear information on what level is needed in order to be able to profit from primary or secondary education. However, we do know that in order to be able to profit from tertiary education, a language proficiency level corresponding to at least the CEFR B2 level is considered to be necessary. This level stands for 'upper intermediate' - 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[55] - still below the highest 'C2' level. For Burkina Faso, we assume that those who pass the *Baccalauréat* exam have at least the B2 level of proficiency in French. According to UNESCO statistics for 2020, this amounts to around 6% of all children.

To get an idea of what would theoretically be possible in this area, Van Pinxteren (2021: 120) has given the example of one of the best educational systems of Europe, that of Estonia. The Estonian education system is able to educate almost 34% of its youngsters to a B2 level of proficiency in English, as compared to just over 6% for Burkina Faso. It achieves this even though Estonian is used as the medium of instruction; English is taught as a subject. This benchmarking yields two interesting insights: 1) it is not necessary to use French as medium of instruction to teach youngsters a good level of French: such a result can also be obtained by teaching French as a subject. 2) if Burkina Faso would emulate the Estonian education system, it could give more than five times as many children a good level of French, compared to today. However, there is a further, more important point to be made here. In order to make that point, we need to look at the level of enrolment in tertiary education. In Burkina Faso, this level has increased significantly over the years and in 2020 stood at 7.84%. However, for Estonia, the level has increased as well and stood at 74.23% in 2019.

What this means is that the Burkinabé education system is able to use French as medium of instruction in all of its tertiary education, because it is able to give as many youngsters the required level of proficiency in French as there are places available. By contrast, even though the Estonian education system is able to give many more youngsters a good level of English, it is not able to use English as medium of instruction in all of its tertiary education. According to UNESCO figures, in Estonia, 34% of children are at the required level of English, but tertiary education is available to over 74%. Because the enrolment level in tertiary education in Estonia is ten times as high as that in Burkina Faso, Estonia has to use Estonian in large parts if not all of its tertiary education system. Prah (2010) wrote that he 'was not suggesting that English should not be taught in African schools but that, as is done in Germany, France, Sweden, Norway, Italy, the Netherlands, Japan, China, Vietnam, Indonesia, Thailand and most countries outside Africa, English should be taught as a subject, a "contact language," and not allowed to supplant the role and position of the local language/languages.' A similar statement could be made, in our view, about French and schools in Francophone Africa. Therefore, if in future enrolment in tertiary education in Burkina increases and if it approaches the levels of the global North, the addition of Burkinabé languages as medium of instruction and examination will become an unavoidable necessity. This will be so at least in parts of tertiary education. Currently and for the foreseeable future Burkina Faso is able to use French as medium of instruction in tertiary education. Let us hope that at some point in the next twenty years, this will change; at such a time it will become impossible to give a good enough level of French to all those intellectually able

to follow tertiary education. Instead, increased recourse will be needed to Burkinabé languages, at least for parts of tertiary education. It is good to point out that this is in fact what is already happening in Morocco, where the GER in tertiary education is now just above 40%. In Morocco, more and more teaching at tertiary level is in Modern Standard Arabic instead of in French.

However, making this change would require a lot of preparatory work. It would be necessary, for example, to develop more and better teaching materials in the languages chosen, not only for use in primary education, but also for secondary education. This is possible, although it takes a lot of work and a long-term commitment. Work should start as soon as possible. Buthow should such a change be brought about and what are the steps that would have to be taken in order to prepare for such a transition?

5. HOW COULD A TRANSITION BE MADE ?

For Burkina Faso and for Francophone Africa in general, it is not yet necessary to introduce indigenous languages in higher education. However, if we consider an optimistic view of the future, it is clear that continuing increases in enrolment will make such a transition necessary. It will be difficult for Burkina Faso to do as well as the best education systems in today's world in teaching French. It seems almost impossible to do much better – Burkina Faso will never become a country of unlimited resources. Therefore, the path that has universally been chosen in the global North will also have to be opened in Francophone Africa.

For the present, it is already possible to start preparing, by introducing indigenous languages in primary education. Knowledge of at least one of these languages should become compulsory by the end of primary school. As we have shown, the proposals made by Somé (2003) twenty years ago retain their validity. However, using recent theoretical insights, we have shown that a simpler and more practical system than the one originally developed by Somé would do justice to the language ecology of the country. This is a low-hanging fruit that would bring immediate benefit to the country and its children.

The first step to take, in our view, would be to establish an expert committee, perhaps led by the URF/LAC of the Université Ki-Zerbo and other language departments in the country. This committee should be tasked with coming up with a set of recommendations on which languages could be developed for use in (higher) education in such a way that almost all Burkinabè in the future can gain access to education in a language that is easy for them to learn. This could also include a discussion of which languages should be added in which areas of the country. These recommendations should probably then be opened to public discussion and debate, resulting in a decision in Parliament.

The next step would be to start preparation for the teaching and use of these languages in primary education in all schools in the country and the adaptation of the required schoolbooks and other materials, in line with the provisions of the current PSEF. Preparations should also be started for the introduction of indigenous languages in higher education, perhaps after the current PSEF expires. It will be necessary to

educate interpreters and teachers, to prepare teaching materials, etc. before a transition can effectively take place. If possible, this could be done together with education authorities in other countries where these languages are spoken as well. The better this is understood and planned, the easier it will become to make the transition.

If Francophone Africa is to decolonize education, education will be extended to a much larger section of the population than only to those eligible to go on to the University level. All education that is given should be relevant for the students – the idea of children dropping out of the system with little or no useful knowledge or skills is wasteful from the point of view of the individual, from the point of view of educational resources not wisely spent and from the point of view of lost economic opportunities. Therefore, it is important to also pay attention to another area of education that is set to expand under the current policy framework, namely the area of technical and vocational training (TVET).

It is likely that in the area of TVET, the current language policy will run into the same problems experienced already by the primary education sector. This is because on average, students who choose a career in this area will be less linguistically gifted than those that choose other routes. We do not know what level of French would be required of students who follow TVET education, but we think it is likely that not all students will have such a level. Therefore, expanding TVET using French as medium of instruction will also mean expanding the drop-out rate, teacher and student frustration and wastage of scarce resources. In practice, these problems can be mitigated if teachers and students use Burkinabé languages in addition to French. This practice is known as 'translanguaging'. However, if the language of examination remains French, this will only offer limited scope for improvement. An immediately useful step to take would be to follow the Maltese example. Malta's College of Arts, Science and Technology does teach partly in Maltese and has the possibility to allow students to present assessmentwork in Maltese.[56] Taking these steps would bring immediate rewards in terms of a more efficient and vibrant education systems, greater innovation and greater achievement and in general a wealthier Burkina Faso able to develop in a culturally appropriate and sustainable manner.

Conclusion

In this paper, we have shown that if in future Francophone Africa aspires to reach education levels comparable to those currently available in France and other countries of the global North, it will have to follow the medium of instruction path that has universally been chosen in the global North. In other words, it will have to make use of African languages as mediums of instruction, alongside with French, at least in large parts of its educational system. We have shown that in order to achieve a transition towards Burkinabé languages, it will not be necessary to use all languages discerned in the country.

We have used the concept of *discerned* versus *designed* languages to demonstrate that one formalized (or designed) language can in fact serve several discerned languages for educational and other purposes. Therefore, we have proposed five principles that should govern a choice of which designed languages to develop for the country. We have used the benchmarked Net Edit Distance scores as provided by the Automated Similarity Judgement Programme to give approximate indications of easy and difficult to learn or teach language pairs. With the help of these scores, we show that the five principles help point to a limited set of Burkinabé languages that could be adequate as medium of instruction. We have therefore called for the establishment of a committee of experts that should study the linguistic situation in the country more deeply and come up with a set of recommendations along these lines, to be discussed in wider society, leading to an ultimate decision by Parliament.

We have shown how already under the current educational strategy the introduction of Burkinabé languages will become a pressing issue, both in primary education and in the area of TVET. Given both the magnitude and the social importance of this transition, preparations should start now towards a more inclusive multilingual approach to medium of instruction in education. Even under the current educational strategy, the introduction of local languages becomes a pressing issue both in primary education and in the area of TVET. It is clear that adding Burkinabé languages as medium of instruction might also have wider implications in society. Somé has suggested that these languages would also be introduced as languages that can be used in courts, for example, or as languages of administration and debate in appropriate regional and national bodies. It is beyond us to predict where this might lead; however, we hope to have demonstrated that it is necessary, possible and positive to use Burkina's multilingualism to its future advantage.

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