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Review of Kretzer, M.; Kaschula, R. (2022) Handbook of language policy and education in countries of the Southern African development community (SADC)

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Michael Kretzer & Russell Kaschula (eds): Handbook of language policy and education in countries of the Southern African development community (SADC)

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This comprehensive work is the first volume in an ambitious series that should see the publication of similar handbooks for all economic regions of Africa. The SADC region covered in this work comprises Southern and Central Africa up to Tanzania in the East and the DRC in the West (but excluding Burundi and Rwanda). It also includes the Indian Ocean small island states. This is a very diverse region, and the volume therefore provides an excellent introduction into the difficult and contentious issues surrounding language policy on the continent as a whole.

The volume boasts a short foreword by Bernard Spolsky, an introduction and an analytical introductory chapter by the editors, and sixteen chapters by a total of 21 authors (many of them African), covering all SADC countries. The agenda for the book is set right at the beginning (p. vii), where Spolsky, reviewing 50 years of language policy, remarks that ‘the general result has been failure.’ In his assessment (p. viii), there is no ‘doubt that without a language policy that considers the diverse varieties that children speak at home, the chances of national development are slight’. This is a sentiment echoed throughout the book. Right at the start (p. 11), Kretzer and Kaschula cite UNESCO 2010 in pointing out that ‘Africa is the only continent where the majority of children start schooling using a foreign language.’ The difficulties and challenges associated with this situation form the book’s central theme.

The volume offers a rich resource for academics and practitioners alike, providing unique and detailed country-level insights. In places, some benevolent English-language editing would have improved readability, although on the whole it is written in accessible language. The first chapter gives an overview of the various issues in language policy, ranging from the conceptual and terminological to attitudinal, legal and socio-economic issues. As such, it provides a concise and highly relevant introduc-

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tion to the field. If one must be critical, one can say that in a way, this book has come too early, because it does not take into account recent insights that take the evolution of educational systems, and especially the growth of enrolment in tertiary education into account. Thus, the book shows why a transition to using African languages as medium of instruction (possibly alongside former colonial languages) is *desirable*, but on the whole it does not show how this could be done in a *practical* way, nor why in future it may become *inevitable*.

A case in point is the chapter on Botswana by Chebanne. It contains a strong plea in favour of language policy that supports marginalised communities, especially the Khoisan. Currently, education is ‘a source of social crisis and cultural trauma, especially at the primary school going age’ (p. 74). In a later article, Chebanne together with this reviewer 2021 take a wider view; whilst still supporting the need to make special arrangements for speakers of Khoisan languages, it goes beyond that. Thus, it also considers the position of Setswana and other languages as compared to English. It extends its analysis to the higher education sector, showing that even at present, Botswana’s educational system is unable to give all children entering tertiary education a sufficient level of English proficiency. In line with Botswana’s Vision 2036, higher education is set to expand. A comparison with the achievements of educational systems elsewhere shows that it will be impossible to achieve this expansion using English as sole medium of instruction. Thus, a gradual transition to Setswana and/or other Botswana languages is going to become inevitable.

For some countries, a change to indigenous languages will be easier than for others. Thus, the small island states all have developed a Creole that could be developed into a medium of instruction, as shown in the relevant country chapters. In Madagascar, Howe discusses a new plan to introduce a late-exit model in education, aiming to produce students competent both in official Malagasy and in French; unfortunately, the chapter could not include information about its implementation. For Tanzania, Brock-Utne and Vuzo give an excellent overview of the history of the language debate and the reasons for its limited progress. They attack the deeply-ingrained misconception that the best way to learn a foreign language is by using it as medium of instruction.

In other countries, the situation is more complex; for some of them, dozens or hundreds of language varieties are counted, as shown in the country chapters. As is almost unavoidable in a publication of this type, the chapters are uneven in coverage and analytical strength. In the Malawi chapter it almost seems as if the authors (Kumwenda and Kretzer) are debating. On page 191, they show why a choice between using English or another language as medium of instruction is often presented as between being ‘inward or outward-looking’. However, they develop their reasoning, leading (p. 196) to a plea for a language policy that ‘really uses indigenous languages.’ The study on Zambia by Ngalande and Kumar gives an overview of language policy (or the lack thereof) since pre-colonial times. The chapter on Zimbabwe by Dube, on the other hand, restricts itself to discussing the function that street and shop signs can have in helping to promote one of that country’s minority languages. These imbalances in the studies and in the analyses they contain show that there is much more work that needs to be done to develop rational and practical language policies in the region.

That being said, this rich volume presents essential reading for all those interested in language and education in Africa. In future volumes, the editors will probably make use of recent insights into the importance of the expansion of higher education, making for a series that will grow from strength to strength.

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