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Let's Look at the Bigger Picture. Educational and Language Sciences in and on Africa or the Problem of the 2000 Languages

Bert van Pinxteren

What This Chapter Is All About

This chapter studies education in terms of what educational systems can deliver in terms of giving students the required language skills in the chosen medium of instruction. It argues that a conceptual distinction between language as discerned and language as designed (or intellectualized) helps in understanding that speakers of several discerned languages can be served by one common (related) designed language. This is common practice in many parts of the world, but not in Africa. The reasons for this are found in part in the history of Africa's educational systems and the comparatively low levels of enrollment in tertiary education. An analysis of the medium of instruction (MoI) situation in 142 countries shows that educational systems can be roughly divided into three categories: decolonial systems, colonial systems, and systems in transition. Increases in enrollment lead to a cry for decolonialization but will also force educational systems to transition away from the use

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of former colonial languages as medium of instruction in Africa. This transition will become urgent as soon as enrollment in tertiary education increases to over 40% (as is currently the case in North Africa).

Who I Am and My Key Intellectual Inspirators

The starting point for some of the ideas in this chapter comes from the work of Prof. Kwesi Prah, founder of the Centre for Advanced Studies of African Society.¹ He was one of the first to forcefully argue for the need to use African languages in all formal domains, seeing this as a key ingredient for just and sustainable development on the continent. As a Dutchman with a history of work in solidarity movements with the global South (originally in the fight against apartheid, later in the domain of environment and development), I seek to work in solidarity with key African thinkers and activists. This is currently achieved in part through my participation in the work of the Edinburgh Circle on the Promotion of African Languages.²

Central Concepts

- Discerned and designed languages
- Cultural identity
- Types of educational systems: colonial, decolonial, in transition
- Gross Enrollment Ratio, tertiary education
- Medium of instruction and enrollment levels

Chapter Structure

1. Introduction
 2. Discerned and Designed—Or the Problem of 2,000 Languages
 3. The Evolution of Education in Africa
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¹ <https://www.uwc.ac.za/study/all-areas-of-study/centres/centre-for-advanced-studies-of-african-society/overview>.

² <https://afrilang.wixsite.com/afrilang>.

1 Introduction

The current literatures on educational and language sciences in and on Africa represent two largely separate domains: educational science generally doesn't concern itself with language, whereas the main focus of linguistics is not on education. An exception is formed by the large body of literature that deals with how individual learners can acquire the former colonial languages and how these languages can best be taught (e.g., Chaudenson, 2006).

Instead, there is room for a more sociological approach that studies education in terms of what educational systems can be expected to deliver at various levels of enrollment and what this means for medium of instruction. There is a relationship between Sustainable Development Goal 4 (SDG4), as agreed by the United Nations, and decolonial forms of knowledge production: current forms of knowledge production in Africa are often divorced from their societal and cultural bases due to the differences between the languages of the masses and the language of knowledge production. This point has repeatedly been made by Prah (1998), Wa Thiong'o (2005), Ndlovu-Gatsheni (2020), and many others.

In order to make a meaningful contribution in this area, it is necessary to make certain choices in terms of this chapter's focus. The first one is that we will be looking at formal, Western-type education—the type that has become predominant in Africa. Of course, education existed in Africa before the introduction of Western-style education, and even today, education outside of the formal sector continues to play an important role, at least in parts of the continent. This is the case, for example, for Islamic education. However, we will focus on formal, Western-type education. The second choice is related to language: this chapter will focus on formalized (or, in my terminology, *designed*; see Sect. 2) languages. This is the way language is usually used, taught, and examined in formal education. The third choice is related to what makes Africa specific, in comparison to other parts of the world. This can be subdivided into two areas: the specificity of Africa's colonial history and the specificity of the evolution of its formal educational systems. These two latter elements deserve a bit of explanation right away.

What makes Africa's colonial history so specific? I follow the view of Vansina (1992), who has pointed out that in Africa, in contrast to other parts of the world, Europe's great 'civilizing'³ mission went a long way towards destroying Africa's pre-existing cultural traditions. This is in contrast to the colonial agendas in the Americas, where not only the cultural traditions, but

³ I put the word 'civilizing' in quotation marks here, because I consider any suggestion that Africa lacked civilization before the colonial period as unfounded.

entire populations were decimated, and in Asia, where colonial domination did not succeed in destroying the older cultural traditions. The result of this is poignantly clear in Africa's language policy constellation: in most African countries, the former colonial languages continue to dominate in all formal domains, including government, the judiciary, and the educational system. This chapter explores ways in which Africans can reclaim and, where necessary, reconstitute their cultural identity. Specifically for education, it means that the focus is on possible pathways out of the colonial educational system that Africa has inherited. This is done especially by looking at the limits of what educational systems can achieve in terms of language teaching.

These brief introductory remarks then set the stage: the next section starts by briefly outlining the distinction between *designed* and *discerned* languages and their relevance for Africa, largely taken from Van Pinxteren (2024). Section 3 considers the evolution of Africa's educational systems, especially focusing on enrollment, and compares this with the situation in other parts of the world. The growth of education is never an uncontested process – it is a terrain where elite recruitment, formation, and the emancipatory struggles of the masses meet and clash. Therefore, an evolution towards the SDG4 goal of 'education for all' is also a social evolution. Section 4 examines the links between enrollment, education, and language, with a focus on medium of instruction (MoI). This then leads me to propose a rough classification of three types of educational systems: those that are still colonial in nature, those that are in transition, and those that might be called decolonial (Van Pinxteren, 2023). In the concluding Sect. 5 I point out what this means for the future of education in Africa, for African agency, and for the research agenda that would flow from the agenda that I put forth and argue for in this chapter.

2 Discerned and Designed—Or the Problem of 2,000 Languages

Language-wise, Europe's colonization of Africa was a two-sided affair. On the one hand, the languages of the colonizers were introduced and given high status, as languages of 'civilization', but also of commerce and administration. On the other hand, and this element is often neglected, indigenous languages were manipulated and downgraded, in the service of the colonial project (see for example Makoni & Meinhof, 2006). Thus, Djité (2008, p. x) asks: '[I]sn't it the case that some languages have simply not been allowed to develop as others have? Isn't it the case that evidence of literacy tradition

in some languages has intentionally been destroyed (...), forbidden (..) or ignored (...)?' Kaschula and Nkomo (2019, p. 607) also make this point: 'The arrival of foreign traders, explorers, missionaries, and colonial settlers resulted in cross-cultural encounters and the transformation of economic, cultural, religious, and political domains, which devalued indigenous knowledge and African thought systems. This not only alienated indigenous people from the socioeconomic and political organizational structures of the new societies, but also de-intellectualized their languages'.

Many authors (Alexander, 2001; Bamgbose, 2000; Prah, 1998, to name a few) have argued that this process would have to be reversed as part of a decolonial project. However, this has not happened for several reasons. One reason is certainly the idea that it would be prohibitively costly to do so, as well as highly impractical, due to the high number of languages spoken in Africa: the 26th edition of the *Ethnologue*⁴ (Eberhard et al., 2023) puts the number of living languages currently spoken on the continent at 2,171. Prah (2012) and others (e.g., Maho, 2004) have challenged the *Ethnologue*, arguing that the number must be much lower and that, many languages that are counted separately in fact form part of a dialect continuum with a high degree of mutual intelligibility between languages. However, even allowing for the possibility that the *Ethnologue* may be over-counting the number of languages, the number of languages spoken in Africa is considerable. A solution to this problem is not made any easier by those who argue, with Makoni and Pennycook (2007), and others before them, that it is wrong to see languages as 'bounded, countable objects'. They prefer to focus on 'what language *actually* is to speakers and hearers' (Lüpke & Storch, 2013, p. 347). Especially in the context of African indigenous languages, this means that the focus is on language as spoken in informal domains; the (potential) role of languages as used in formal domains, such as in literature or administration, is ignored.

To reclaim a status for African languages as formalized and intellectualized, it is helpful to use the distinction between language as *discerned* versus language as *designed*. Discerned languages are those dialects or speech registers that are so distant from one another that linguists, policymakers, or others feel it is justified to speak of different languages. The word *discerned* points to the act of discerning—the political and social act of pronouncing a dialect to be a language. Designed languages, on the other hand, are those languages that have been developed (designed) for use in all formal domains (education, the judiciary, the legislature, etc.). What I have shown previously

⁴ <https://www.ethnologue.com>.

(Van Pinxteren, 2022) is that in many countries (China, Germany, Italy, and others), speakers of several *discerned* languages can and are being served by one formalized, *designed* language. All have to learn this formalized language in school. However, because the formalized (designed) language is relatively close to the discerned languages of the speaker community it services, this formalized language is relatively easy to acquire. Note that the discerned languages do not all need to be mutually intelligible—what is necessary is that the designed language that services the language community should be roughly equally easy to learn for all. What this means is that it is possible, in principle, to use a limited number of designed African languages in formal domains, a number that is much lower than the total number of languages discerned for Africa. To illustrate the importance of this point, consider the case of Nigeria, with over 225 million people the most populous country on the continent. The *Ethnologue* (26th edition) currently discerns 520 indigenous living languages spoken in the country.⁵ This number itself serves as a powerful deterrent against using indigenous languages in formal domains in the country. However, Oloruntoba-Oju and Van Pinxteren (2022) have shown that speakers of these languages could be served equitably by somewhere between twelve and 24 designed languages (depending on linguistic and socio-cultural choices to be made). This is still a sizeable number, but within the realm of what would be practically thinkable. Thus, the European Union, with nearly 450 million people, uses 24 official languages.⁶ India, with over 1.4 billion inhabitants and more than 700 discerned languages, has 22 official languages.⁷ The conclusion must be that the practical example set by large multilingual and multicultural units outside of Africa could also be applied to Africa.⁸

3 The Evolution of Education in Africa

Western-style education was introduced first by missionaries and later by colonial governments more or less two centuries ago. It was very limited in scope, restricted to basic literacy skills that would help in evangelization and to clerical skills required for colonial administration. Those few who made

⁵ <https://www.ethnologue.com/country/ng/>, accessed 15 January 2024.

⁶ https://european-union.europa.eu/principles-countries-history/languages_en, accessed 17 January 2024.

⁷ <https://static.mygov.in/indiancc/2022/10/mygov-10000000001200937734.pdf>, accessed 17 January 2024.

⁸ For what this means for Botswana see Chebanne and Van Pinxteren (2021), for Ghana see ResCue and Van Pinxteren (2022).

it to University were usually schooled in the metropolis, not locally. Even though Timbuktu hosts one of the oldest Universities in the world, the first Western-style University in Africa was probably Fourah Bay College, established in Sierra Leone in 1827. Any form of higher education was for a very small elite: Altbach (2012, p. 96) gives the enrollment in tertiary education in 1965 in Sub-Saharan Africa as a meager 0.4% of the population aged 20 to 24—against 13.7% for the global North. This enrollment ratio was the lowest of any world region. For primary and secondary education, enrollment in Africa was also much lower than in the global North.

However, over the past more than half a century, Africa has made spectacular strides in enrollment in education. UNESCO now uses a similar measure to Altbach, the Gross Enrollment Ratio (GER). This ratio compares the number of students enrolled at a specific level of education (primary, secondary, tertiary) with the number of youngsters in the age group for which such education is intended (six to twelve, twelve to eighteen, eighteen to twenty-four years old).⁹ UNESCO gives the GER for tertiary education in sub-Saharan Africa in 2020 as 9.48%, more than a 20-fold increase compared to 1965. For primary education, the GER was over 99.5%; for secondary education, it was 43.85%. Note, though, that these averages hide large differences between and within countries—for example, tertiary enrollment in 2020 in Botswana stood at over 26%, whereas for Chad it was under 2%.

Impressive though some of these numbers are, also in light of the population growth in Africa over the same period, a GER in tertiary education of just under 10% means that Africa is still far away from the enrollment ratios in the rest of the world. Enrollment in tertiary education in 2020 for all high-income countries¹⁰ combined had grown to nearly 80%. For primary education, in these countries the figure was above 100%; for secondary education, it was above 100% as well.

These figures are not meaningless. Bourdieu and Passeron (1979) have already pointed to the importance of education as part of a society's power structure. Thus, enrollment levels in tertiary education for a particular country form an indication of the social function of tertiary education in that country. This indication is largely independent of the quality of the education. In general: if only a low proportion of the population of a country

⁹ <https://uis.unesco.org/en/glossary-term/gross-enrolment-ratio>, accessed 17 January 2024. A GER of above 100% means that many people outside of the target age group enroll at that level of education.

¹⁰ High-income countries as defined by the World Bank classification of countries into income groups; the high-income countries roughly correspond to what is also known as the global North. See <https://blogs.worldbank.org/opendata/new-world-bank-group-country-classifications-income-level-fy24>, accessed 17 January 2024.

has access to tertiary education, then that education will be key to reproducing that country's elite. If, on the other hand, a very high proportion of the population of a country has access to tertiary education, then that level of education will not be the key mechanism for reproducing the elite *per se*. Trow (1974) has proposed a shorthand measure for assessing the function of education in society: education that is accessible to less than 15% of the population is elite education. Education accessible to between 15 and 40% of the population is mass education. Education accessible to more than 40% of the population is called universal education. What this means, then is that in high-income countries tertiary education is now universal (going by Trow's categorization). In sub-Saharan Africa, it still has a function of serving to select and educate the elites. The FeesMustFall unrest that rocked South African universities in 2015 and 2016, for example, can be seen as an indicator that the social function of tertiary education in that country is changing: instead of serving the needs of a small elite, the demand is more and more to also cater to the needs of an aspiring middle class.

The other element that is relevant concerning the evolution of education in Africa is the amount of selectivity in the system. Thus, in sub-Saharan Africa, there is a small group of highly educated elite, separated from the masses by a wide educational gulf. In the global North, on the other hand, those who are highly educated are surrounded, and in a way carried, by a large group of people who are not as well educated, but who are still able to follow and criticize what the elite does. This is not just a function of the development of capitalism. It can also be seen as a result of the social struggle that has always characterized the capitalist system.

In Africa, language plays a particular and unique role in connection to the evolution of education—this is the topic of the next section.

4 Education and Medium of Instruction—What Can an Educational System Deliver?

In most countries of the global North, the medium of instruction for the majoritized population is a *designed* language that is close to the *discerned* languages spoken in those countries: High German in Germany, Italian in Italy, Korean in Korea, and so on. Perhaps it is for this reason that one question has not been asked: what can an educational system be expected

to deliver in terms of giving students adequate language skills in situations where a non-indigenous language is used as medium of instruction?¹¹

Historically, this question was not only relevant to Africa. Thus, Otterspeer (2008) has written a history of Leiden University in the Netherlands. Originally, the medium of instruction there was Latin—a 'dead' language, that nobody spoke at the time. Before being able to attend university, students had to learn Latin in special elite schools that were set up for that purpose. However, gradually it became more and more difficult to equip increasing student numbers with the required level of Latin. Therefore, by around 1860, a more efficient solution was chosen: using a standardized form of Dutch as medium of instruction. This situation, by the way, was not unique to the Netherlands: a few centuries ago, across Europe, Latin was the language of science and education, in somewhat the same way English is nowadays (even though English is not the main medium of instruction at most universities in Europe, in contrast to Latin).

In more general terms, this leads to two theoretical questions:

- (1) What proportion of children are intellectually capable of taking some form of tertiary education?
- (2) What proportion of children can an education system give the required language skills using a very different language as the medium of instruction?

If proportion (2) is always higher than proportion (1), then there is no problem—all children who are intellectually able to get tertiary education can first be given the required language skills in whatever is chosen as the medium of instruction and then receive their tertiary education in that language. On the other hand, if proportion (2) is lower than proportion (1), there will be a problem. Children will not be able to follow tertiary education, because they can not be given the required language skills. Therefore, educational development will be stymied—or, alternatively, a change to a medium of instruction (a *designed* language) that is closer to what children already know will be required.

¹¹ In this globalizing world, it is thinkable that this question, currently most relevant for the global South, will become relevant in the North again, where populations are becoming increasingly mixed.

To find an answer to the second question, I have used European Union-commissioned research on second-language competencies (European Commission, 2012). Based on the outcomes of that research, I have proposed, ‘as a working hypothesis, that there is a “language barrier” approximately at the level of a GER of 40% for the highest level of secondary education. (...) Above this level, a switch to a designed language that is close to (one of the) discerned mother tongue(s) becomes necessary’ (Van Pinxteren, 2022, p. 75).

Finding an answer to the first question requires a bit more explanation. While the UN has made ‘Education for All’ one of its sustainable development goals, this does not mean that all children should receive the same or as much education—we cannot all become professors. However, those who are intellectually capable of taking tertiary education should have that opportunity. What percentage of youngsters are we then talking about here? Rather than abstractly answering this question, we can have recourse to UNESCO statistics and examine what the best educational systems currently existing can deliver in practice. The best measure we have for this is the Gross Enrollment Ratio (GER) in tertiary education. In my dataset, the highest GER is for Greece—it stands at 114% (see appendix). This means that in Greece, many people who earlier in life did not have a chance at entering tertiary education enrolled in it later in life. A better indicator would be the net enrollment ratio, which leaves out those students who are not part of the target age group. However, UNESCO does not publish figures for the net enrollment ratio for tertiary education. It does get published for senior secondary education (15–18 years of age). When examining net enrollment ratios for senior secondary education, we see that in some countries, almost all youngsters receive education up to senior secondary level: this is the case for example for Spain, Singapore, Sweden, and several other countries. The GER for tertiary education in these countries is above 80% and in some cases above 90%. What this means, then, is that we can safely conclude that the best educational systems in the world today can educate around four out of five youngsters up to the tertiary level.

If the working hypothesis cited above is correct, then in principle, proportion (1) (the proportion of children intellectually capable of taking tertiary education) will be higher than proportion (2) (the proportion of children an educational system can give required language skills in a language very different from the language(s) the children already know at the start of education).

Can we see this in educational systems around the world? To examine this, I have combined UNESCO data with data from the World Higher Education Database.¹² This gave information both on the medium of instruction and the main language(s) used in 142 countries and territories with a population of over 1.5 million (see appendix). In some countries, the medium (or mediums) of instruction in tertiary education corresponds to the main language(s) spoken in those countries. In the appendix, these are shown in green. Then, there are some countries in which the medium of instruction in tertiary education is that country's main language as well as an international language (English, French, Mandarin, or Russian). Those countries are shown in yellow. Lastly, there are some countries in which the medium of instruction is not one of the main language(s) spoken in the country. Those are marked in orange. What the tabulations show, is that there is a correlation between GER and medium of instruction, although it is not absolute. Three groups of countries can be distinguished.

First, there is a group of 56 countries with a tertiary GER of 60% or above. In all these countries, the main language(s) of the country is or are also one of the mediums of instruction (most countries in this group are marked in green, some in yellow). There is only one exception: Belarus, where the Medium of Instruction is Russian. However, the fact that Belarussian is closely related to Russian can explain this exception. I propose to call the educational systems in this group 'decolonial systems'.

There is a second group of 31 countries in this tabulation with a GER between 30 and 60%. In this group, the picture is mixed: in some countries, notably in Latin America, the language of the majority of the population is used. In some, such as India, several languages are used, both local and former colonial languages. I propose to call the educational systems in these countries 'systems in transition'. As enrollment increases, these educational systems are going to be confronted with increasing difficulties in giving all youngsters the required language skills. They will face increasing pressure to consider changing the medium of instruction, at least for parts of the educational system. Two countries in this group do not use a national language as medium of instruction: Botswana and the Philippines. For Botswana, with a GER of just above 30%, Chebanne and Van Pinxteren (2021) have argued it will become necessary to change to using indigenous languages if education is to expand further. For the Philippines, with a GER of just above 40%, Manalastas (2022, p. 211) has made an important point. He states that 'proficiency in English in the Philippines is largely predetermined by one's

¹² <https://www.whed.net/home.php>.

birth'. This means that English currently helps to 'perpetuate the systematic social inequalities that hinder most Filipinos from ever rising above their socioeconomic class'.

Then, the appendix shows a group of 55 countries with a GER below 30%. In most of these countries, the language of the former colonial power is also the medium of instruction (marked in orange in the table). I propose to call these colonial educational systems. They are still influenced by the colonial ideology that the only road to knowledge is through the former colonial language. In these countries, the GER is so low (compared to the countries of the global North) that it is always possible to find enough clever youngsters who manage to acquire the right language skills, either because they have a talent for language learning or because their parents can afford expensive private tuition. Even these countries, however, do have a choice: as the table shows, there are some countries with a low GER that have decided to do things differently. Countries *can* make different choices. Several countries in this group have introduced local languages in addition to the former colonial language, while Laos has chosen only Lao as the medium of instruction.

Most of the countries with a GER below 15% are situated in sub-Saharan Africa. The medium of instruction in those countries is generally the former colonial language, even where there is one national language, such as in Burundi, Madagascar, and Rwanda. In the case of Rwanda, it is interesting to note that medium of instruction has switched to English from French.¹³

Some scholars, such as Meighan (2022) have argued that privileging former colonial languages is tied to upholding colonial mindsets and imperial legacies, and that doing so leads to exclusive attention to Western epistemologies. Meighan has termed this 'coloniallingualism'. I argue that this is not always the case, since education is always a site of social struggle, and situations will arise where the *content* of education has changed even though the medium of instruction has not. The reverse is also possible, at least in theory. Thus, the situation in Myanmar, where Birmese dominates in all formal domains although it is not the medium of instruction in tertiary education, is likely to be quite different from that in Gabon, where French dominates in all formal domains. Nevertheless, it is good to keep in mind that growth in enrollment is always more than a mere technocratic evolution—an increase in numbers is always accompanied by a change in the content of education as well. Waves of student protests in Europe in the 1960s or more recently in South Africa are all symptoms of the fact that education, and education for

¹³ The reasons for this change are related to the specificities of the rise to power of the Rwandan Patriotic Front and its president, Paul Kagame. For more information, see for example Rosendal and Amini Ngabonziza (2023).

the masses, are always contested domains. It is shaped through social struggle, in which the desires and needs of the masses as well as the needs of the system intertwine in complex ways.

In conclusion: this section set out to answer the question of what the relationship is between enrollment levels in tertiary education and medium of instruction. A comparison of GER in tertiary education, data on the medium of instruction and data on the main language(s) spoken in 142 countries and territories from all continents shows that there is a clear link, leading to a rough grouping of educational systems into three groups. I have called educational systems in countries with a tertiary GER of 60% or above decolonial systems. In almost all these countries, the medium of instruction is also (one of the) main language(s) spoken in the country. Then, there is a second group of countries with a tertiary GER of between 30 and 60%. I have called these systems in transition. Several models for medium of instruction are in use in these systems. The third group of countries is where there is a tertiary GER of below 30%. I have called the educational systems of those countries colonial. They are characterized by the fact that in most (although not all) of these countries the medium of instruction is different from the main language(s) spoken in the country. Together, this data lends support to the idea that educational systems will be forced to transition to one or more language(s) close to the main language(s) spoken in countries when tertiary GER reaches a level of approximately 40%. This also entails a transition from a colonial to a decolonial system of education.

5 The Problem of the 2000 Languages: What to Expect for the Future?

The bigger picture that I have illustrated through my arguments and the tabulations and analysis of enrollment and medium of instruction data, is that there continues to exist a large gap between the proportion of youngsters receiving some form of tertiary education in the global North and the proportion receiving such education in Africa (and in some other parts of the global South). We must assume that this is not due to differences in intellectual abilities. This also means that there is a large reservoir of human talent in Africa that remains largely untapped. For the future, it is logical to assume that Africans and African nations will seek to close this gap. It is possible that education in Africa can reach many more youngsters than is currently the case; as it is in the global North, where increasingly all children receive an education that is adequate to their abilities.

However, at some point, the continued growth of education in Africa will require a shift to using African languages as a medium of instruction, as is currently happening in several countries with educational systems that I have termed ‘in transition’. This is because educational systems are unable to deliver the required language skills in a language that is very different from what children already know to all students who are intellectually able to participate in tertiary education. The one exception here is Singapore. This is an immigrant country, in which all or almost all children use multiple languages from childhood. In theory, African countries could also make that choice: an African country could decide to raise all its children with multiple languages from childhood, using one or more African languages plus a former colonial language. However, this might be possible in some parts of some countries (see Alfredo, 2022, for information on Luanda in Angola), but it will be very difficult to implement in all countries, given the low penetration of former colonial languages in most African countries. In short, then, it is a fiction that African educational systems will be able to expand indefinitely using their current medium of instruction policies.

Therefore, a shift is likely to happen; it will become an urgent problem as soon as tertiary GER approaches approximately 40%. Maghreb countries¹⁴ are already nearing this threshold—but in sub-Saharan Africa, there is still some way to go, with Botswana and Namibia being closest with a GER of over 25%. There is likely to be a gradual shift: indigenous languages may not be introduced at the same time in the entire system or for all fields of study. It is also likely to be a contested process, tied as it is also to the evolution of decolonial cultural and epistemic perspectives.

A change to African languages as a medium of instruction is not only necessary for theoretical reasons (Prah, 1998), but it is also going to be inescapable as enrollment increases. What is more, it is also a practical possibility. Using the idea of *discerned* and *designed* (or formalized) languages, I have shown that elsewhere in the world one designed language can serve speakers of several related discerned languages in formal domains, such as education. This route is also open to African countries, enabling the use of multiple languages but not *all* of the 2,000 languages discerned on the continent.

These conclusions go beyond, and in a way are more radical, than two other approaches commonly discussed in the literature. One is the ‘translanguaging’ approach (Makalela, 2015).¹⁵ This is a plea for allowing learners to

¹⁴ The Maghreb countries are Algeria, Morocco and Tunisia.

¹⁵ See Bagga-Gupta and Messina Dahlberg (2018) on the origins of the term and some of its more problematic aspects.

use their full language repertoire in classrooms. It represents a clear break with practices where speaking 'the vernacular' was forbidden and punished, and in certain circumstances, it offers promising results. However, as also pointed out by Meighan (2022), it has structural limitations, among others because it instrumentalizes indigenous languages for the purpose of learning international languages. This is especially so where international languages remain the medium in which examinations have to be taken. My arguments in this chapter move beyond the translanguaging approach, in that they allow for a questioning of the current dominant language regimes. Furthermore, they sketch out a perspective for a transition to a situation where several languages can have equal status as mediums of instruction as well as for examination purposes.

Another approach encountered in the literature questions seeing languages as 'bounded, countable objects' altogether (Makoni & Pennycook, 2007; Ndhlovu, 2015). It advocates a focus on 'what language *actually* is to speakers and hearers' (Lüpke & Storch, 2013, p. 347). In African settings, this leads to a focus on language use in informal settings. This has advantages but runs the risk of drawing attention away from language use in formal settings. In colonial educational systems, these formal settings continue to privilege former colonial languages. The approach I have advocated for in this chapter, in contrast, helps to give colonized peoples access to the same kinds of social innovations (i.e., formalized language) that others also have access to and thereby opens the road towards an evolution in a decolonial and liberating direction.

Reflective Statement

In this chapter, I have argued that rational choices in developing designed (African) languages for higher education are possible and unavoidable. But I do not have an answer as to which languages this would be and how it should be done in concrete cases—I cannot go beyond developing the reasoning and developing the context. Moving to implementation will require considerable research and the energies of educators, linguists, and policymakers alike. Research into which languages would be seen as acceptable or which could serve most speakers of discerned languages as designed language is needed, research into language policy and effective policy implementation is likewise needed.

Current educational systems in many African countries are wasteful and need to be re-thought bottom-up, rather than top-down. How would it be possible to use existing resources in a more efficient way, leading both to curricula that are more appropriate for local situations and to higher academic achievement overall? African languages will be essential for that—but the statement by itself is not sufficient. How to go about this in concrete situations? What can educational systems deliver in Africa, under different language regimes? Where does the ‘language barrier’ lie in concrete cases? We do not know how easy is it for which African learners to acquire sufficient foreign language knowledge (or to be taught such knowledge through education). These are questions that could occupy the energies of linguists and social scientists for years to come, but will prove to be well worth the effort.

Appendix: GER, MoI and Main Languages

Explanations: GER data on tertiary education are published by UNESCO at <http://sdg4-data.uis.unesco.org/>. In order to include as many countries as possible in the dataset, data from 2012 to 2022 have been used. For some countries and years, the GER may be above 100 (in case many students outside of the 20–24 age group are enrolled in tertiary education). For those countries, the *lowest* figure has been used; for all other countries, the highest figure has been used.

Countries in which the main language(s) of the country are also the Medium of Instruction (MoI) (according to the World Higher Education Database) have been marked in green. Countries in which at least one of the MoIs is also a main language of the country have been marked in yellow. Countries in which the MoI is **not** one of the main languages of the country have been marked in orange.

Gross enrolment ratio for tertiary education, both sexes (%)			Pop > 1.5 M
Country	GER	MoI	Main language(s)
Decolonial systems			
Greece	113.74	Greek	Greek
Australia	107.81	English	English
Argentina	99.17	Spanish	Spanish
Puerto Rico	97.5	Spanish	Spanish
Spain	95.96	Spanish	Spanish
Finland	95.05	Finnish	Finnish
Latvia	94.86	Latvian	Latvian
Korea. Rep	94.03	Korean	Korean
Belarus	93.54	Russian	Belarusian
			English, Mandarin, Malay, Tamil
Singapore	93.13	English	
Chile	93.1	Spanish	Spanish
Netherlands	92.01	Dutch	Dutch
United States	88.89	English	English
		Mandarin, English,	
Hong Kong SAR, China	88.44	Cantonese	Cantonese
Austria	87.21	German	German
Slovenia	87.02	Slovene	Slovene
Russian Federation	86.4	Russian	Russian
Sweden	84.52	Swedish	Swedish
Norway	84.44	Norwegian	Norwegian
Denmark	82.84	Danish	Danish
Ukraine	82.67	Ukrainian	Ukrainian
Belgium	80.89	Dutch, French	Dutch, French
Lithuania	79.75	Lithuanian	Lithuanian
Canada	79.52	English, French	English, French
Ireland	77.78	English	English
New Zealand	77.26	English	English
Bulgaria	75.41	Bulgarian	Bulgarian
Estonia	74.23	Estonian	Estonian
Poland	73.96	Polish	Polish
Germany	73.52	German	German
Iran. Islamic Rep	72.96	Farsi	Farsi
Georgia	72.54	Georgian, Russian	Georgian
Saudi Arabia	71.41	Arabic	Arabic
Peru	71.13	Spanish	Spanish
Kazakhstan	70.68	Kazakh, Russian	Kazakh, Russian
Portugal	70.38	Portuguese	Portuguese
Turkey	69.77	Turkish	Turkish
United Kingdom	69.48	English	English
Italy	69.47	Italian	Italian
France	69.35	French	French
Serbia	69.18	Serbian	Serbian
Israel	68.57	Hebrew	Hebrew

Croatia	68.1	Croatian	Croatian
Czech Republic	68.06	Czech	Czech
Uruguay	67.88	Spanish	Spanish
Mongolia	67.7	Mongolian	Mongolian
Albania	65.78	Albanian	Albanian
Switzerland	65.33	German, French, Italian	German, French, Italian
Japan	64.62	Japanese	Japanese
Bahrain	64.53	Arabic	Arabic
Cuba	63.83	Spanish	Spanish
China	63.6	Mandarin	Mandarin
Moldova	62.88	Romanian	Romanian
Hungary	61.46	Hungarian	Hungarian
Dominican Republic	61.16	Spanish	Spanish
Kuwait	61.13	Arabic	Arabic
Systems in transition			
Costa Rica	57.67	Spanish	Spanish
Colombia	56.43	Spanish	Spanish
Slovak Republic	56.14	Slovak	Slovak
Armenia	55.41	Armenian, Russian	Armenian
Brazil	55.14	Portuguese	Portuguese
Algeria	53.74	Arabic, French	Arabic, Tamazight
United Arab Emirates	53.72	Arabic	Arabic
Kyrgyz Republic	53.46	Kyrgyz, Russian, Uzbek	Kyrgyz
Romania	53.23	Romanian	Romanian
Ecuador	52.59	Spanish	Spanish
Bosnia and Herzegovina	50.78	Serbian, Croatian, Bosnian	Serbian, Croatian, Bosnian
Thailand	50.68	Thai, English	Thai
Palestine	48.47	Arabic, English	Arabic
Panama	47.8	Spanish	Spanish
Oman	47.41	Arabic, English	Arabic
Malaysia	46.76	English, Malay	Malay
Mexico	44.81	Spanish	Spanish
Mauritius	44.39	English, French	Creole, English, French
Morocco	43.45	French, Arabic	Arabic
North Macedonia	43.12	Macedonian	Macedonian
Syrian Arab Republic	43.05	Arabic	Arabic
Jordan	41.83	Arabic	Arabic
Philippines	40.42	English	Filipino
Egypt, Arab Rep	38.9	Arabic	Arabic
Azerbaijan	38.24	Azerbaijani, Russian	Azerbaijani
Indonesia	36.44	Bahasa Indonesia	Bahasa Indonesia
Tunisia	35.88	French, Arabic	Arabic
Vietnam	35.4	Vietnamese	Vietnamese
India	31.3	English, Bengali, Hindi, Panjabi, Tamil, Urdu, Gujarati	Hindi, many others
Tajikistan	31.26	Tajik, Russian	Tajik

Botswana	30.24	English	Tswana
Colonial systems			
El Salvador	29.92	Spanish	Spanish
Jamaica	28.76	English	Patwa, English
Democratic People's Republic of Korea	28.11	Korean	Korean
Namibia	27.26	English	Oshiwambo, Khoekhoe, others
Honduras	26.16	Spanish	Spanish
Bangladesh	25.1	English, Bengali	Bengali
Qatar	25.04	Arabic, English	Arabic
South Africa	24.24	English, Afrikaans	Zulu, Xhosa, Afrikaans, others
Guatemala	22.14	Spanish	Spanish
Sri Lanka	21.61	English, Sinhala, Tamil	Sinhala, Tamil
Nicaragua	21.33	Spanish	Spanish
Uzbekistan	21.25	Uzbek, Russian	Uzbek
Gabon	21.07	French	Fang, Mbere, Sira
Lao PDR	19.02	Lao	Lao
Myanmar	18.82	English	Birmese
Ghana	18.69	English	Akan, others
Sudan	17.67	Arabic, English	Arabic
Nepal	17.11	English, Nepali	Nepali
Cameroon	16.96	English, French	French, Kamtok, others
Benin	15.96	French	Fon, Yoruba, others
Senegal	15.63	French	Wolof
Turkmenistan	15.61	Turkmen	Turkmen
Togo	15.4	French	French, Ewe, Kabiye
Cambodia	13.14	English, Khmer	Khmer
Congo, Rep	12.67	French	Kituba, Lingala
Pakistan	12.22	English, Urdu	Urdu, Punjabi, Pashtu
Nigeria	12.1	English	Hausa, Igbo, Yoruba others
Liberia	11.92	English	Kreyol, Kpelle
Guinea	11.56	French	Fula, Maninke, others
Kenya	11.46	English	Swahili, Kikuyu, Luo, others
Lesotho	11.45	English	Sotho
Angola	10.63	Portuguese	Umbundu, Portuguese, others
Afghanistan	10.56	Pashto, English	Dari, Pashto
Ethiopia	10.49	English	Oromo, Amhara, Somali, others
Zimbabwe	10.01	English	Shona, Ndebele
Cote d'Ivoire	9.95	French	Baulé (Akan), others
Burkina Faso	9.54	French	Mooré, Dyula, Gourmanche
Congo, Dem Rep	8.26	French	Lingala, Kituba, Swahili
United Republic of Tanzania	7.83	English, Swahili	Swahili
Rwanda	7.67	English	Kinyarwanda
Mozambique	7.31	Portuguese	Makhua, Tsonga, Karanga, others
Mali	7.06	French	Bambara, Soninke, Fula, others

Burundi	5.95	French	Kirundi
Mauritania	5.87	French, Arabic	Fula, Soninke, Wolof
Madagascar	5.53	French	Malagasy
Uganda	5.22	English	Ganda, Acholi, others
Niger	4.41	French	Hausa, Zarma, others
Zambia	4.12	English	Bemba, Nyanja, Tonga, others
Eritrea	3.85	English	Tigrinya, Tigre, others
Chad	3.43	French, Arabic	Hausa, others
Central African Republic	2.98	French	Sango
Gambia	2.72	English	Mandinka, Fula, Wolof, others
Malawi	1.72	English	Nyanja, Tumbuka
Paraguay	1.42	Spanish, Guaraní	Spanish, Guaraní
South Sudan	0.75	English	Nuer-Dinka, Arabic, others

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