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Editorial: five paradigms about language use in Africa

Djouroukoro, D.; Oloruntoba-Oju, T.; Otundo, B.; Pinxteren, L.M.C. van; Yallew, A.T.

Citation

Djouroukoro, D., Oloruntoba-Oju, T., Otundo, B., Pinxteren, L. M. C. van, & Yallew, A. T. (2025). Editorial: five paradigms about language use in Africa. *Language Policy In Africa*, 1(2), 1-3. doi:10.36950/lpia/01-02-2025-6

Version: Publisher's Version

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Downloaded from: <https://hdl.handle.net/1887/4285800>

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

Editorial: five paradigms about language use in Africa.

Publishing a new scientific journal as a group of committed volunteers, based in three continents, is a challenging and time-consuming undertaking. For our inaugural edition this past May, it was encouraging to see largely favourable responses from the editorial board and encouraging statistics on the uptake. In the first month after publication, our [inaugural editorial](#) was viewed by over 700 interested readers. However, early momentum alone cannot guarantee continued success. Fortunately, we were able to keep most of our editorial team together. Lynn Kisembe, from Moi University in Kenya, had to resign from the team due to other pressing commitments and is now replaced by Billian Otundo, from the University of Bayreuth in Germany. We continued to receive submissions and managed the challenge of getting good-quality peer reviews. Thus, we are now proudly able to present our second issue.

The current issue boasts a number of contributions that, together with those included in the inaugural one and its accompanying editorial, invite renewed reflection on how we understand, evaluate, and envision the role of this journal within the broader field of African language policy scholarship. These contributions demonstrate the theoretical and practical complexity and multilayered nature of language policy in Africa, where colonial legacies continue to shape postcolonial realities.

Across the discussions in this and the previous issue, debates on medium of instruction and official language use in Africa seem to converge around **five types of responses** or paradigms. All of them deal in some way with the implicit and explicit interplay between indigenous and colonial languages. They are of academic as well as practical significance.

The **first**, perhaps most common, paradigm does not really question the use of former colonial languages as official languages or as mediums of instruction (MoI). The recent and controversial directive by Nigeria's Minister of Education, mandating the use of English as the MoI nationwide, falls into this category. Within this paradigm, the focus is placed primarily on improving the efficiency of teaching in the former colonial language.

[Ouedraogo's contribution on Burkina Faso](#), included in this issue, exemplifies both the rationale and the difficulties inherent in this position. The article by [Dankwa-Apawu et al.](#) published in the inaugural issue on translanguaging in the classroom also belongs to this type of response. The authors explain how translanguaging is used “to enhance understanding, explain concepts, and facilitate home-school cooperation.” (p. 92) Here, African languages



are mobilised to make the teaching of literacy and numeracy in the MoI, which in this context is the former colonial language, more efficient.

A **second** paradigm, still centred on languages of European origin, is a variant of the first: rather than insisting on the use of these languages, it advocates their adaptation to the sociolinguistic realities of African populations. [Belibi's article in this issue](#) on accepting “Postcolonial Englishes” falls into this category. According to Belibi, in “each postcolonial multilingual environment, a nativized and standardising variety of English is often used in the educational system, administration, and media, instead of Standard British English (SBE)” (p. 02-1). The author’s plea is for adopting such a nativized variety as the local standard. A bit further along the same path would be to turn the pidgins and creoles that have evolved in various parts of Africa, such as West African Pidgin English, into a common intellectualised language to be used as a medium of instruction. While these proposals acknowledge linguistic diversity, their net effect is that African languages are still relegated to the informal domain.

A **third** paradigm argues for the equal treatment of *all* languages spoken in a given country, advocating mother-tongue instruction. However, implementing this paradigm raises complex questions about determining what counts as a “language”, ultimately outsourcing these decisions to external sources and databases, such as those of the *Ethnologue* or *Glottolog*. These sources favour a definition of a language that leads to many different languages being counted separately. The risk of this approach is that it may lead to aspirational policy declarations with little or no consequence for policy or practice.

The **fourth** paradigm challenges the very premise of teaching languages as discrete, bounded entities. Proponents of this perspective emphasise the fluidity of linguistic exchanges and encourage people to draw on all available linguistic resources rather than conform to rigid categories. Perhaps an initiative that exemplifies this theoretical perspective is the [Liliema project](#) implemented in the Casamance region of Senegal, which teaches learners to read and write using a nationally-developed orthography that transcends language boundaries. While this approach gives greater pride of place to African languages and affirms linguistic agency, it still works within the current *status quo*, in which the former colonial languages retain disproportionate prestige in formal domains.

Lastly, the **fifth** paradigm, which this journal advocates, proposes working towards the incremental introduction of African languages as official languages and as MoIs. This approach hinges on recognising the importance of mother tongue(s) while also ensuring that citizens have access to an official language that is linguistically close to what they already

know. In this approach, languages of European origin would be taught as subjects, but they would be used as mediums of instruction in a more limited way than is currently the case. [The article by Sanogo in this issue](#) goes in this direction. The author discusses Burkina Faso's decision to grant its national languages official status from 30 December 2023, and outlines the conditions necessary to make this a meaningful and actionable policy direction rather than a mere populist gesture. Other contributions also illustrate the breadth of research needed to advance this paradigm, which is largely ignored by mainstream linguistics. In this issue, [Agyeman and Ansah](#) analyse the gaps in language policy development and implementation in Ghana. [Olubode-Sawe](#) focuses on terminology development, anticipating a forthcoming special issue we hope to publish next year, featuring the results of the 3rd Colloquium on terminology development in African languages, held at *Université Yambo Ouologuem of Bamako* (Mali) in July 2025. [Van Pinxteren's article in the inaugural issue](#) on enrolment trends in tertiary education further underscores the emerging structural need for MoI-related reform.

Despite the complexity of these approaches and their implications, we believe that the fifth paradigm offers a sustainable and equitable long-term pathway – and can also be implemented in ways that are both practical and fair. However, as an academic journal, we remain committed to intellectual inclusivity and will continue to accept submissions that represent any of these paradigms outlined in this editorial. We also welcome contributions that deepen, challenge and unsettle them. *Language Policy in Africa* remains open to evidence-based, rigorous, and theoretically as well as methodologically ambitious contributions related to language policy in Africa.

Feedback from you, as readers, is always appreciated. If you find value in this journal, we encourage you to share it with colleagues and students and to help broaden the conversation on language policy in Africa.

Djouroukoro Diallo

Taiwo Oloruntoba-Oju

Billian Otundo

Bert van Pinxteren

Addisalem T. Yallew

