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Future trajectories for multilingual education in Africa: longer-term policy options

Abstract

According to UNESCO (2003: 18), multilingual education can make mother tongue instruction possible while providing at the same time the acquisition of languages used in larger areas of the country and the world. In the African context, advocating for multilingual education means using at least one African language as the initial medium of instruction, preparing for a switch to another language later on. Here, I will ask the question how sustainable such a strategy will prove to be for the longer term, as enrolment levels in secondary and higher education increase on the continent. I argue that the current multilingual models, which involve a switch from an African language as medium of instruction to a former colonial language will become increasingly problematic. The argument is supported by an examination of educational systems in other parts of the world. This leads to the conclusion that there is need for a model for multilingual education that is based on African languages as medium of instruction at all levels of education; other languages will in future be taught as subjects. However, which African languages should be chosen as medium of instruction, using which rationale? I argue that rational and practical choices are possible. For the longer term, a transition from the current models will be needed; implementing this will require more research, leading to an increased role for linguists in this area.

Keywords: Multilingual education, intellectualized languages, African languages, higher education

Introduction

At independence, the leaders of Africa were faced with a difficult situation: the countries that the colonising powers had carved out rarely

corresponded to logical conglomerations of ethnically or linguistically related groups. Many ethnic groups were divided over different countries (Asiwaju 1985). Under these circumstances, in almost all countries the choice was made to keep the former colonial language as the official language and the medium of instruction after the first few years of primary education (Skattum 2018). This situation, where one language has a much higher status than other languages, has been referred to as (one of) diglossia (Fishman 1967). In some countries, the situation was different. Thus, Ethiopia was never colonized; it originally used Amharic as its official language; later, though, English was chosen as the medium of instruction in higher education (Appleyard/Orwin 2008: 278). In Somalia, Somali is widely used at all levels. In Tanzania, Swahili was chosen as the official language, even though English remains the medium of instruction in secondary and higher education. In North Africa (Algeria, Morocco), Modern Standard Arabic is in some cases used as a medium of instruction alongside other languages (see for example Jaafari 2019). Overall, though, the practical use of African languages as official languages and as medium of instruction in secondary and higher education remain exceptions. Even in countries that are monolingual or close to monolingual (Burundi, Madagascar, Rwanda), the former colonial language was maintained as medium of instruction. Rwanda even traded one foreign language (French) for another (English).

The diglossic situations referred to above mean that children are forced, from early on in their education, to study in a language other than their own. To deal with the problems this brings, teachers and children can employ several strategies. Thus, in class, teachers and students can and often do use whatever speech registers are available to them. This may include using dialectal variants, code-switching, translanguaging, in-class translation, and so on. Sometimes this is done in violation of official policies, but sometimes policies encourage the use of these strategies. However, teachers and students have only a limited degree of freedom here: the teaching materials and exams are usually in some form of standardized or intellectualized language. Furthermore, at the primary level, more freedom in how to speak and how to test is generally allowed as compared to secondary and tertiary education.

The consensus in scientific circles, as already voiced in a UNESCO report of 1953, is that such learning is inefficient: education in the

mother tongue leads to better results at lower cost. Even the early exit models that are currently in place in many countries, where a change to a former colonial language as the medium of instruction takes place after the first few years of primary education, are inefficient (Heugh 1999; Skattum 2018). Ouane and Glanz (2010) have given an overview of what this leads to, summarizing the works of many educationists and linguists over the past decades; it boils down to the fact that many children do not get the education that would profit them (and their countries) most.

Several authors – both African and from outside of the continent – have, over the years, argued in favour of a shift towards the use of African languages as a medium of instruction. A key visionary arguing for change is Kwesi Kwaa Prah. As early as in 1991, he argued: “If African languages are developed, to carry modern science and technology, transformation of the African earth would be rapidly advanced” (Prah 1991: 61). Another well-known proponent of this line of thinking is certainly Ngūgĩ wa Thiong’o. In his opinion, it is ‘only through the use of African languages shall we be able to break with European memory’ (Wa Thiong’o 2005: 164). Recently, Ndlovu-Gatsheni has added his voice to the debate, building on the work of Wa Thiong’o. Thus, he has attacked:

the process of deliberate ‘stupidification’ of African children, youth, and even academics through consistent disciplining into abandonment of their mother tongues so as to use imperial and colonial languages of domination in their research, teaching, learning and even everyday conversations and communication. (Ndlovu-Gatsheni/Msila 2021: 38)

Many non-African authors have followed the same line of reasoning, stressing various elements of the debate. These include (for example) Skuttnab-Kangas (2013) and Wolff (2016). Skuttnab-Kangas especially has been vocal in defining the right to use one’s mother tongue in all domains as a human right. Wolff (2016), in exasperation, remarks that “stakeholders, African and expatriate alike, just won’t listen to experts.” Many other authors have presented similar arguments for their respective countries. Among the best-known are Bamgbose (2000) for Nigeria, Chumbow (2005) for Cameroon, and Alexander (1998) for South Africa. As Kaschula and Nkomo (2019: 619) have put it: the “language question is [...] the ‘elephant in the room’ when it comes to development in Africa.”

Nevertheless, to this day, some of the poorest countries in the world spend scarce resources on educational systems that are inherently wasting both money and talent. Why is that the case?

Clayton (1998) has given a useful overview and analysis of the reasons given in the literature for Africa's continued use of former colonial languages as medium of instruction – the debate does not seem to have moved on significantly after that. In his summary, there are two types of explanations. The first type consists of explanations linked to the world economic system and the role local elites play in that system. These explanations point to the role of the former colonial powers, who want to keep their influence. In this group, Clayton also lists explanations that point to the role language plays in maintaining the privileged position of local elites (elite closure – Myers-Scotton 1993). The second type is made up of explanations related to the functions languages have for national development and integration: these hold that using former colonial languages is more affordable, is advantageous for international communication, and helps build national unity (or prevents national disintegration).

Together, the explanations summarized by Clayton (1988) show that Africa carries with it a legacy from colonial times that seems difficult to overcome, despite the spirited pleas put forward by a great many authors. Is there scope for agency? Can multilingual education provide a solution? What would that involve, and what are its possibilities and limitations? To explore some answers to that question, section two below first tries to clarify, based on the literature, what is meant by multilingual education and some related terms. Section three takes a look at the limits to the current multilingual education models, in part by examining educational systems in different parts of the world. It leads to the conclusion that current models may offer a short-term solution, but may not work in the longer term; instead, more use will have to be made of African languages. Section four then examines the practical problem of which language(s) to choose as medium of instruction. It suggests that the distinction between language as discerned and language as designed or intellectualized may offer the beginnings of a solution. This then leads to a discussion of some future policy options for African countries in section five and some concluding remarks on possible directions for future research in section six.

Multilingual education in the African context

UNESCO (2003: 17) states: ‘Bilingual and multilingual education refer (sic) to the use of two or more languages as mediums of instruction’. According to UNESCO: ‘In regions where the language of the learner is not the official or national language of the country, bilingual and multilingual education can make mother tongue instruction possible while providing at the same time the acquisition of languages used in larger areas of the country and the world.’ In the UNESCO definition, then, multilingual education will include education in what it calls the ‘mother tongue’, as well as the use of another language as medium of instruction.

There are several ways of providing bilingual or multilingual education, some leading to better results than others. Ouane and Glanz (2010), writing for UNESCO, recommend what is called the late-exit method. In this method, the mother tongue is used as medium of instruction for as long as possible (at least the entire primary school period). The official or national language is taught as a subject during that period. There is then either a complete or a partial switch to this official language for secondary and higher education. This model is also advocated by many other authors, such as Heugh (1999).

However, despite this, the late-exit method is the exception, rather than the rule in most countries in Africa (Skattum 2018). In most countries, there is at best an inefficient early exit model, with a complete switch to the official language as medium of instruction after the first three years of primary education.

What this can lead to is illustrated by what the famous Nigerian author Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie had to say, when asked why her books were not written or available in her native language, Igbo. She responds:

I'm not sure my writing in English is a choice. [...] Although I took Igbo until the end of secondary school [...], it was not at all the norm. Most of all, it was not enough. I write Igbo fairly well but a lot of my intellectual thinking cannot be expressed sufficiently in Igbo. Of course, this would be different if I had been educated in both English and Igbo. Or if my learning of Igbo had an approach that was more holistic.

The interesting thing, of course, is that if I did write in Igbo [...], many Igbo people would not be able to read it. Many educated Igbo people I know can barely read Igbo and they mostly write it atrociously.¹

This quote illustrates the problems associated with inefficient education. It also points to the difference between bilingual or multilingual education as an educational system and multilingualism at the level of individuals. In many countries around the world, one language is used as a medium of instruction, but one or more other languages are taught as subjects. This means that monolingual education can still lead to multilingual people.² Therefore, the UNESCO definition as given above is perhaps too narrow. I would propose to extend the definition, to read that bilingual and multilingual education refers to an education that leads to people who are able to make functional use of two or more languages in their professional lives.

When is a person multilingual? Authors give different definitions, ranging from complete competence in several languages to the ability to use several languages in limited ways. A consequence of this lack of clarity is that when it comes to multilingualism, there is often no or little discussion of the level of proficiency. Thus, a person may be able to order a coffee and a sandwich in a given language, but unable to follow secondary-school level instruction in that language, let alone being able to write a paper in that language. For Africa, the issue of proficiency is key, as will be discussed in section three.

Policies leading to the implementation of multilingual education in Africa as advocated by UNESCO can be seen as a positive step to take. However, when thinking about the future, two complicating questions may help to explain why, if the recommendation is so clear, it has not already been universally adopted in Africa. The first of these is the question of the mother tongue – what is considered a language, what is a

¹ <https://nollyculture.blogspot.com/2018/02/0-false-18-pt-18-pt-0-0-false-false.html> accessed 6 April 2023.

² Of course, people can also learn a language outside of the formal schooling system, for example through interactions with people with other language backgrounds, via the media, or through travel. Many also manage to mix expressions from different languages in one or more of their speech registers in day-to-day communications.

dialect, and what does that mean for the use of African languages as medium of instruction?

The second question is related to thinking through what UN Sustainable Development Goal Four (SDG 4) (United Nations 2015) of Education for All means for the feasibility of multilingual education. Making a switch from one language to another as medium of instruction places certain demands on educational systems. Under what conditions will educational systems be able to meet those demands? If such conditions cannot or can no longer be met, what would that mean for policy options?

These questions will be examined in the next two sections, in reverse order.

What can multilingual education achieve in practice?

SDG 4 aims to 'Ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all'. This is a break from colonial education, where education was never aimed at 'all'. But it means, for example, that all those who are capable of taking higher education should be able to do that and should therefore have the required language skills. Is that currently the case, and what will the future bring?

In general terms, it is clear that, currently, only a minority of Africans are proficient in a former colonial language. Albaugh (2014: 221) gives estimates of the portion of the population in sub-Saharan Africa who speak a former colonial language. Her figures for the 'francophone' nations are the most comparable because for those countries she can use data collected by the Organisation Internationale de la Francophonie (OIF). The average figure she gives for Africans able to speak their former colonial language is 18%. This creates a potential problem for African educational systems because learners first have to gain proficiency in the medium of instruction before being able to get full profit from such instruction.

One example is that of Botswana. Botswana is the country with the highest enrolment ratio in tertiary education in sub-Saharan Africa,

standing at around 25%.³ The medium of instruction in tertiary education in Botswana is English. That means that at least 25% of youngsters in the country should have sufficient competency in English at the end of their secondary school. Is that the case? Chebanne and Van Pinxteren (2021) have tried to answer that question. They have estimated the level of English proficiency of Botswana's youth by multiplying the completion rate for senior secondary education by the percentage of students that obtain a grade of C or higher in English in the BGCSE⁴ examinations. They concluded that currently, Botswana's education system can educate slightly more than 13% of its young people to this level of proficiency in English – far short of the required level of 25%. This must lead to problems in Botswana's higher education, although evidence of this is hard to find. An illustrative example can be found in the study by Moumakwa (2002), who found 'that more than fifty percent of students in senior secondary schools in Botswana couldn't deal effectively with texts containing difficult vocabulary'.

In other African countries, enrolment ratios are lower and therefore it could well be that the strains experienced by the Botswana educational system are not felt as acutely in other countries. It could also be that more efficient teaching and added resources would lead to better results, also in Botswana.

However, for the future, the aim should be to increase enrolment levels in Africa, so that SDG 4 comes within reach. This ultimately means aiming for enrolment levels that are comparable to those already found in the global North. For high-income countries, the enrolment ratio in tertiary education currently stands at nearly 80%, compared to nearly 25% for Botswana today. It means that in the long term, enrolment in tertiary education in Botswana could more than triple. For other African countries, the growth potential is even higher. This also means that African educational systems should, in future, be able to give nearly 80% of their youngsters sufficient competency to take tertiary education in a

³ The statistic used here is the Gross Enrolment Ratio in tertiary education. Data in this chapter on completion rates and enrolment ratios are all taken from UNESCO, <http://sdg4-data.uis.unesco.org/>

⁴ The Botswana General Certificate of Secondary Education is the Certificate that can be obtained after completing senior secondary education in the country.

language that is quite different from the mother tongue. Is that a realistic goal? Are there any educational systems in the world able to do this?

Yes – there is precisely one educational system that is characterised by a high enrolment ratio in tertiary education, even though it uses a medium of instruction that is not related to the mother tongue of most students. This is the educational system of Singapore. Singapore's tertiary education enrolment ratio stands at well over 80%. The medium of instruction is English, even though the mother tongue of most Singaporeans is Cantonese, with large minorities speaking Malay or Tamil. However, the Singaporean educational system is not multilingual in the sense described above: the medium of instruction is English right from the start. There is no early or late exit from Cantonese, Tamil, or Malay to English. These languages are studied as subjects and not used as medium of instruction. Singapore can do this in part because it is an immigrant society and parents try to raise their children bilingually. There is also a very comprehensive preschool system, where children start to learn English before they enter primary school (Hairon 2022).

Are there perhaps any educational systems that combine a switch at some point from instruction in the mother tongue to instruction in a very different language (multilingual education as defined by UNESCO), with high enrolment ratios? The short answer is no. However, some educational systems could be considered partially multilingual, in the sense that higher education is provided in two or more languages, one of them being close to the mother tongue of students. A case in point is Hong Kong, which has a similar tertiary enrolment ratio as Singapore: there, higher education is provided in Mandarin as well as in English, even though the mother tongue of most students is Cantonese. Then, there are several former Soviet Union countries (such as Armenia and Georgia), where higher education is provided in the local language as well as in Russian.⁵

Lastly, in the Maghreb countries (which have tertiary enrolment ratios ranging from 35 to 55%), the mediums of instruction are Modern Stand-

⁵ Information on medium of instruction in higher education is taken from the World Higher Education database, <https://www.whed.net/home.php>

ard Arabic⁶ and French. (For a more extensive discussion of this, see Van Pinxteren 2023.)

There are educational systems that do better than the Botswana system in giving many of their youngsters a level of competency in English that would be sufficient for taking tertiary education in that language. Data on this is available for many EU countries: in 2011, the European Commission commissioned an assessment of second-language proficiency of secondary school students in the last year before their final exams (European Commission 2012).⁷ Thus, the Estonian education system can educate almost 34% of its youngsters to a sufficient proficiency level in English for tertiary education, a proportion that is more than twice as high as that of Botswana. However, the medium of instruction in higher education in Estonia is Estonian – not English. This stands to reason because the tertiary enrolment ratio in Estonia as reported by UNESCO is over 70%.

In theory, given unlimited resources, it might be possible to educate every child to any desired level of competence in a language other than its mother tongue, no matter how different that language may be. However, in practice, resources are never unlimited. What this short discussion has shown is that under exceptional circumstances (such as those of Singapore, which is probably unique), it is possible to reach a high proportion – a proportion that is so high that all those who have the ability to take up higher education can do that in the designated official language, a language different from the mother tongue. Under less exceptional circumstances, educational systems do not manage this. This means that in almost all countries that have a high enrolment ratio in higher education, the medium of instruction is in the mother tongue of the students or a language close to it, or that such a language is at least one of the mediums of instruction. The children that take such education can still have some level of competence in more than one language. In that sense, they are multilingual – even though in the strict sense of the

⁶ Note that the *Ethnologue* considers Modern Standard Arabic <arb> a different language from Moroccan Arabic <ary> or Darija, as well as from Algerian Arabic <arq> and Tunisian Arabic <aeb>.

⁷ The survey material is still available online via <http://www.surveylang.org/>, accessed 23 April 2025. The survey has not been repeated.

UNESCO definition given above, the education system in those countries may not be multilingual.

What do these considerations mean for the future of multilingual education in Africa? Before we can turn to that, it is important to first consider the issue of language choice.

Africa and its 2,000 mother tongues

The question of what can be considered a ‘language’ and then of how many languages are spoken in Africa has many answers – it is impossible to do it justice within the framework of this chapter. For a discussion, see for example Prah (2012). To make matters more complicated, some question the very idea of seeing languages as ‘countable objects’ (Ndhlovu 2015). One way out may be to talk about speech registers instead of languages. However, this does not solve the problem, because, in theory, there are at least as many speech registers as there are individuals. If the speech register of the teacher is not too different from the speech registers of the pupils, children will generally understand what they are being taught. But when are speech registers so different that there is no longer any meaningful mutual intelligibility between them? How many and which speech registers would have to be employed to teach all children in a speech register close to their own? It is the same problem but restated.

For this chapter, we will follow the assessment of two of the most commonly cited sources, the *Ethnologue*⁸ and the *Glottolog*⁹ databases. Both try to count and classify all languages spoken in the world using specific sets of criteria, and both assert that there are over 2,000 languages spoken on the continent (of which over 500 are in Nigeria alone). Does this then mean that policy advocates should ask for 2,000 mediums of instruction to cater to the entire continent? That would be a difficult task to achieve.

To deal with this problem, Prah (2012) has argued that the number of languages is overstated and that far fewer languages would be required. Van Pinxteren (2022) proposes a slightly different approach, point-

⁸ <https://www.ethnologue.com>

⁹ <https://glottolog.org/>

ing out that all over the world, speakers of several related (cognate or partially cognate) discerned languages are served by education in one related designed or intellectualized, or formalized language.¹⁰ Thus, in the UK, Scots¹¹ speakers receive their instruction in English. In a country like the Netherlands, the *Ethnologue* discerns 11 closely related languages; speakers of all these languages receive their education in Dutch. This does not mean that speakers of these different discerned languages do not have to make an effort to learn the related designed language – however, because the languages are related, the effort is considerably less than trying to learn in a completely unrelated language (as would be the case, for example, if Scots speakers would be required to learn in Mandarin Chinese, rather than in English). In addition, many speakers of minority languages grow up being bilingual from a very early age, thus reducing the effort that is required to learn the standard language.

It is conceivable that in a country like Madagascar, where the *Ethnologue* discerns 11 different Malagasy-like languages, the initial medium of instruction could be one of these.¹² Writing on Nigeria, Olorunoba-Oju and Van Pinxteren (2023) show that for that country, somewhere between 12 and 24 languages would be sufficient. This would still be difficult to implement – but it is not beyond what can realistically be imagined. This point has also been made by Chumbow (2005:177):

It has been argued that learning a zonal language for one who speaks a different mother tongue from the zonal language amounts to learning a foreign language (such as English). This is not entirely true if the zonal language chosen is closely related to the child's mother tongue. For example, because of 'deep' intrinsic relations between Bantu languages of the same sub-group such as Bakweri and Duala (Cameroon), it would be much

¹⁰ These terms – language as designed, intellectualized, or formalized all have slightly different connotations, a discussion of which falls outside the scope of this chapter. For practical purposes, they can be used interchangeably. For a more detailed discussion, see Van Pinxteren (2024).

¹¹ The *Ethnologue* and *Glottolog* both consider Scots, ISO 639 code <sco> a language that is different from although related to English, not to be confused with Scottish Gaelic, code <gla>, which is a Celtic language that is quite different from English.

¹² This language could be Merina Malagasy, ISO 639 code <plt>, an official language in Madagascar. In practice, the history of Malagasy as medium of instruction in the country is long and complicated; for an overview, see Howe (2022).

easier for a Bakweri to use Duala as medium in the school system (and vice versa) than English or French.

The comparative ease or difficulty of teaching (and learning) a more related language, as compared to teaching (and learning) a more distant language has not received much attention in the literature. However, there is some US experience. The US Government has published a list of language pairs, giving for each pair the number of weeks of full-time formal instruction needed for a talented native English speaker to reach the IRL 3 proficiency¹³ level in a given other language.¹⁴ Level 3 is roughly equivalent to the CEFR C1 level.¹⁵ The most difficult language pairs require more than eight times as much instruction as the easiest language pairs. It may not be possible to generalize this level of difference between easy and difficult language pairs to people around the world – it could be that people who are already multilingual require less effort, for example. On the other hand, it could be that for people who are less talented or less motivated the difference between related and unrelated language learning and teaching is even greater. In all, this data does illustrate the basic point made by Chumbow: teaching (and learning) a related, but different language takes considerably less effort than teaching (and learning) a completely unrelated language.

Prah and others have pointed out that, in many parts of Africa, children grow up from an early age using more than one language. Many children employ speech registers that take elements from several discerned languages and can thus be said to be bi- or multilingual from birth. This means that in some areas of Africa, it will be possible to use

¹³ IRL is a US-based way of measuring language proficiency. It stands for the Interagency Language Roundtable (ILR) and has five broad levels. <https://www.govtilr.org/> accessed 22 May 2024.

¹⁴ <https://2009-2017.state.gov/documents/organization/247092.pdf> accessed 22 May 2024.

¹⁵ <https://blogs.transparent.com/language-news/2014/10/22/the-starting-line-how-to-determine-your-language-level/> accessed 22 May 2024. CEFR is the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages: <https://www.coe.int/en/web/common-european-framework-reference-languages/table-1-cefr-3.3-common-reference-levels-global-scale>

a designed language that is in use as a *lingua franca* in that area—something that Mufwene (2023) has recently pointed out.

Designed language choices should be based as much as possible on considerations of fairness to the speakers of all the discerned languages that are involved. Van Pinxteren (2022: 213) has proposed five principles that could guide such choices:

1. Choose a limited number of designed languages for education.
2. Choose these languages in such a way that they are easy to learn for as many speakers of related discerned languages as possible.
3. Choose designed languages in such a way that all have to exert a relatively low but relatively equal effort to learn them.
4. Make use of existing bilingualism as a resource.
5. Build incentives for linguistic collaboration, especially for related linguistic communities.

This short discussion shows that a practical way to make a start with multilingual education is to use fewer than all 2,000 languages currently discerned in Africa and to aim for a late-exit model. For the short to medium-term future, such a policy is likely to be to the benefit of Africa. For the longer term, enrolment levels in Africa are likely to approach those of the North. When that happens, multilingual education may have to evolve into a system that does not switch from an indigenous language to a former colonial language, but rather to one in which indigenous languages are used as medium of instruction throughout. In such a system, students acquire competence in foreign languages through being taught those languages as subjects, as is already common practice outside of Africa.

Future policy options for multilingual education in Africa

For decades, UNESCO has been advocating mother-tongue-based education all over the world (UNESCO 1953). In Africa, that ideal has proved to be elusive indeed. In such a context, where former colonial languages dominate, introducing bilingual or multilingual education will be a step forward, both for cultural and efficiency reasons. It will be

important to use the most efficient way of doing this – in practice, that means employing a late-exit model, in contrast to the early-exit models that are currently common on the continent. The discussion above on the use of designed languages to serve speakers of several related (cognate or partially cognate) languages – as is common outside of Africa – shows that introducing education using local languages as medium of instruction is a practical possibility, making use of existing multilingualism and of the fact that many languages currently discerned in Africa are closely related.

However, as the experience in other parts of the world shows, multilingual education as narrowly defined by UNESCO can only be an intermediate solution for Africa. African education systems will be unable to expand indefinitely using former colonial languages as medium of instruction. If the SDG 4 goal of education for all is to be taken seriously, Africa has to prepare itself for a continued expansion of higher education, to approach the levels commonly found in the global North. If and when that happens, Africa will be faced with the same constraints faced by educational systems elsewhere: resources will always be limited. Therefore, African countries will be forced to look for efficiency. Perhaps some countries will be able to follow the path taken by Singapore, although currently none of the countries in Africa seem to share the characteristics of that country. Most countries will have to follow the path taken by countries elsewhere. That path is to choose a limited number of designed languages as medium of instruction, languages that are related to the languages discerned in those countries. Other languages will be taught as subjects. For higher education, there is then more freedom to offer curricula in local languages, possibly in addition to other languages. This will lead to an education that is still multilingual, though not in the narrow sense of an education that switches from one medium of instruction to another one at some point. It will be multilingual education in a broader sense, in that, through the teaching of foreign languages as subjects it will give students the ability to make functional use of two or more languages in their professional lives.

Apart from the theoretical long-term perspective that results from a consideration of the need for a drastic expansion of higher education in Africa to meet the goals of SDG 4, there is also a more practical reason why multilingual education in the narrow sense should be seen as an

intermediate step only. This has to do with the perspective that is offered to parents and students.

If parents and students see that knowledge of a former colonial language is a passport to a better life, they will go to any length to ensure that this knowledge is acquired (De Swaan 2001). Children will be sent to expensive private schools that advertise that they only use the former colonial language as medium of instruction. Parents will only speak the former colonial language to their children, even if they are themselves not very proficient in that language. Speaking local languages will be looked down upon. Attempts to introduce local languages as medium of instruction will be resisted. In short: no effort will be spared to teach and to learn the former colonial language, as long as it is seen as key to success in life. For that reason, it is important to change the perspective, and this is something that has to be done in a top-down manner, as also pointed out by Mufwene (2023). Parents and children have to be given the perspective that a future is possible for them by using local languages. This can mean, for example, that some academic careers (perhaps only a few at first) should be opened using local languages as medium of instruction. It may also mean that a certain level of proficiency in a local language is a prerequisite for getting certain jobs in the public and/or private sectors. It may also mean stimulating a media landscape in which local languages have some prominence.

Conclusions – way forward for research

It seems almost absurd that a discussion with this level of abstraction is still needed. Given the magnitude of the tasks ahead, much more will be needed, in much greater detail. It is necessary to examine in a more practical way what policy options are available, especially with specific languages and linguistic zones. Thus, Chebanne and Van Pinxteren (2021) have started to analyse the linguistic landscape and the options for choosing a set of designed languages for Botswana; Oloruntoba-Oju and Van Pinxteren (2023) have done this for Nigeria; and Kamdem, Ojongnkpot and Van Pinxteren (2025) have analysed the situation for Cameroon. However, all these studies have shied away from giving precise recommendations on which languages to use, although they have

identified the relevant language families in the respective countries. More analysis would be needed there, and similar analyses would have to be carried out for all the other countries on the continent. Any transition would require careful preparation and planning and a sustained commitment by successive governments. That would probably have to be based on a broad societal dialogue, to create sufficient understanding of and support for any transition. How could such a dialogue be established in specific country contexts? What would have to be put in place in terms of materials development and teacher training for a transition to be effective? What would a transition mean for corpus planning, and how could that be implemented? These and more questions come to the fore when embarking on a line of thinking as advocated in this chapter.

Specialist linguistic knowledge can provide crucial inputs for making science-based, informed, and equitable choices, both for which designed languages to choose and for how they should be further developed to fulfil the social and scientific functions required of them. This also places new demands on the training of linguists: they should be able to think in policy terms and to work with others in multidisciplinary teams, aimed at changing how things are currently done, more than just at documenting what seems to be rapidly disappearing.

Moving from legacy educational systems in which a minority of the population received education in a former colonial language to education for all based on indigenous mediums of instruction will become necessary in most if not all, African countries as enrolment levels in tertiary education continue to rise. The transition will be difficult but not impossible; it is likely to bring tremendous benefits to the continent. Multilingual education as narrowly defined can play a role in this transition, although at best as an intermediate step only. The whole process will require a long-term shift in thinking and much more research and debate. In this, linguists and other social scientists have an important role to play. The perspective is that they can help shape practical, efficient, rational, and inclusive African language-based policies on the whole continent.

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