



Editorial: The Relevance of *Language Policy in Africa*

As an editorial team, we proudly present this inaugural issue of *Language Policy in Africa*. We are pleased with all the good that is in this issue – but equally aware of its possible limitations. We believe that, together, they point the way for future developments in the field. Before we turn to a brief discussion of what this issue holds in store, we also want to devote a few words to the origins of our initiative and its relevance as we see it. We end the editorial with a few pointers to what we would like to publish in future and a few words of gratitude to those who were instrumental in bringing this issue about.

Origins

In the beginning, there was the European Conference on African Studies that took place in Edinburgh back in 2019. There, a little-visited panel in one of the Friday morning “graveyard slots” of the Conference was the occasion for a few like-minded people to meet. These were all activists of one type or another, interested in the use and promotion of African languages. All felt isolated – lone voices in their countries and academic communities. They decided to start an informal network, the [Edinburgh Circle on the Promotion of African Languages](#). This network grew organically and presently has over 100 members, who all share the basic belief that more use of African languages is unavoidable and that African languages are key to development on the continent. Over the years, the circle coordinated the networking of members at various conferences and organised a successful series of webinars. In 2023, the idea to start a journal was born. This was discussed in the circle’s steering committee and was first shared with circle members in August 2023. Right from the start, the feeling was that, for such a journal to be relevant for Africa-based scholars and others, it should be published open access, and should be free of any article processing charges. In addition, it should adhere to the accepted strict criteria of double-blind peer review and subscribe to high standards of academic and ethical integrity.

Circle members greeted the initiative with enthusiasm, thus making it possible to establish an editorial board, a group of five editors, three editorial assistants and two book review editors. Fortunately, the University of Bern (Switzerland) agreed to host the journal through

its *Bern Open Publishing* platform. The editorial board was able to meet in January 2024, and took a number of important decisions, both on the name of the journal and its mission and vision.

Several calls, both via the circle and various electronic media, led to a number of submissions, giving the editorial team the difficult task of deciding which submissions were good enough to go into peer review and then of organising the peer review process. As editors, we made the conscious choice to involve as many Africa-based scientists and peer reviewers as possible. This also had a downside: Africa-based scholars are often overstretched, overcommitted and underfunded – leading to longer review times than would have been desirable. We held monthly video meetings, and had regular contact in-between via email and instant messaging. It was wonderful that we were able to hold the team together – we all are volunteers. Many of us had to do this work in addition to our regular demanding jobs and faced life-changing events, both happy and unfortunate ones. But we managed. Therefore – yes, we are proud. Nevertheless, the question still deserves to be answered: *why did we decide to go through all this trouble? For what?*

Relevance

In colonial and postcolonial Africa, arguments have been made that using local African and indigenous languages would be divisive and undermining of national unity (Mazrui, 1966). Others argue that it would be hugely expensive, isolate countries from the rest of the world, run contrary to the wishes of the citizenry, and prove unworkable in highly multilingual urban settings (Clayton, 1998). Moreover, it is deemed unnecessary because children can learn an additional language and can be taught in such a language. In several African contexts, nation-states are often seen as weak, and policies, including language policies, are often no more than pious statements that bear little or no resemblance to what happens on the ground (Bamgbose, 2000).

To counter these arguments, others have argued that education in the “mother tongue” – the language(s) children learn at a very early age – works best. It is not only more efficient but also better for preserving local knowledge and maintaining cultural identities (Ouane & Glanz, 2010). Using local languages in formal and informal domains is also seen as a basic human right (Skutnabb-Kangas, 2013).

Unfortunately, the state of the debate does not seem to have changed much over the years. The same arguments have been repeated over and over again over the past decades, with no resolution in sight and little visible change on the ground. So why, then, take the trouble to

start a separate journal devoted to language policy in Africa? The reasons are both practical and theoretical. We want to start with the theoretical first.

Prah (2010, p. 8) already underlined the importance of language and literacy for (economic) development stating, “The real launch-pad is literacy....every society that ‘takes off’ may be seen to have crossed, some decades earlier, the decisive literacy threshold of 50% of the population or – still more decisive – 70% of young people aged 15–25.” Prah further asserted:

literacy in the colonial language refers to literacy for $\pm 10\%$ of our populations. On that statistical basis it is impossible to move a society forward. If one also, for the sake of argument, imagines that the task is to make our populations literate and work in French, English or Portuguese, we must realize that that day will never come... (p. 9)

In other words, language is central to development – therefore, also, having the right language policy in place and implemented is a necessary (though not a sufficient) condition for achieving (economic) development. Recently, the mirror image of this argument has also been presented, for example, by Oloruntoba-Oju and Van Pinxteren (2023). That basically states that giving youngsters a sufficient level of proficiency in the former colonial language will gradually become an impossible task for African educational systems. This will happen when there are further increases in enrolment in tertiary education, especially when approaching levels as seen in the global North. In other words, it is not only the case that literacy (in African languages) leads to development. The reverse is also true: development will lead to an increased need for literacy (in African languages). What Oloruntoba-Oju and Van Pinxteren also show is how a transition to an increased use of African languages is possible and thinkable, even in a linguistically diverse country such as Nigeria, using a more limited set of languages than the over 500 currently listed for the country.

In their discussion of the relationship between language use in Africa and the consequences of language policies on the continent, Diallo and Bearth (2022) recall that the UN Agenda 2030, although pretending “to leave no one behind”, will not include the large majority of African citizens if African languages are not taken in consideration. They recall that language is an instrument of social inequality, inclusion, exclusion and marginalisation. It sets up the conditions for economic production, distribution of resources, as well as access to health and social services, and is central in the process of governance, specifically on the African continent. Tackling these questions requires suitable language policies in African

states. Our journal seeks to contribute to this conversation and invites academics, experts as well as practitioners to join it and share insights on this central topic.

These insights make an analysis of enrolment trends in tertiary education a new key element when considering language policies and their implementation. They also lead to a possible way out of the stalemate described above. The debate will move from the purely academic into the field of the real economy since it is the economy (and the related need for educated manpower) that will make changes a necessity. They also mean that a journal devoted to language policy in Africa is now more relevant than ever. A transition to using African languages more in formal domains on the continent, though necessary, will take time and will not be easy to achieve. Mistaken policies or implementation can easily set a country back and lead to unfortunate policy reversals. Thus, a discussion of what works and what does not work and of why and in which countries what choices are available is now more needed than ever.

The area of (tertiary) education is not the only domain of interest here. Fields such as acquisition planning, digitisation, terminology development, and language use studies have important contributions to make. We invite scholars in those fields to submit their works, insofar as they relate to language policy.

On the practical side, we recognise that existing journals devoted to language planning and language policy could play a useful role here.¹ However, we see that currently, contributions on Africa are few and far between in such journals, are more oriented towards linguistics than to language policy, are spread over different journals and are often not available in open access. Thus, providing a forum such as this journal seems relevant. This does not mean that we cannot learn from other contexts (South Asia, for example), or that others cannot learn from what is happening in Africa. That is why this journal also encourages comparisons with situations in other parts of the world. We hope it will find a wide readership, within and beyond the continent.

In this issue

This inaugural issue contains several interesting submissions that speak to the points raised above. The first is the opinion piece by Professor Salikoko Mufwene, who gives a broad overview of the origins of the current diglossic situation in Africa. We highly

¹ See, for example, <https://link.springer.com/journal/10993>, <https://www.jbe-platform.com/content/journals/15699889> and <https://www.tandfonline.com/journals/rall20>



recommend reading this paper because the author points out how the allegedly unifying function of using former colonial languages such as English, French or Portuguese in practice serves rather to divide and to marginalise large groups in society. In his view, it is sound economic policy, rather than using one “unifying” language, that will bring about peace and prosperity.

Van Pinxteren looks at enrolment trends in higher education in East Africa, showing that current language policies in the region will no longer be sustainable in the future. He concludes that for Tanzania, using Swahili as a medium of instruction in higher education would be a feasible option, although special attention should be given to speakers of non-Bantu minority languages. For Kenya and Uganda, such a solution will not be sufficient: several languages will have to be chosen for use as mediums of instruction in higher education.

Other articles in this issue discuss language policy-related issues considering specific countries. For instance, Boussagui and El Allame give an overview of the situation in Morocco, with a special focus on the position of the Amazigh language. Morocco, a country with high participation in higher education compared to the rest of Africa, has seen a constant debate on whether – and how – to introduce Arabic as a medium of instruction instead of French. In the process, the position of Amazigh has not become stronger, although the language has a higher level of institutional protection than most other African languages.

On the other side of the continent, Chebanne and Mogara examine the situation in Botswana, where speakers of Khoi-San languages face even greater challenges. They discuss how sound policies could help address the marginalisation of these minority languages.

This issue also features articles that explore more specific concerns. Oborah charts the language policies of two Nigerian radio stations and recommend better training and collaboration with language experts. Dankwa-Apawu et al examine the limitations to translanguaging in an area of Ghana where speakers of the Santrokofi (Selee) minority language are systematically put at a disadvantage. Thango addresses the (lack of) appropriate language policy in banks in South Africa. Story investigates how the diglossic situation in Nigeria is reflected in the language policies of the Church of the Latter-day Saints. A unique feature of the journal is that many of the articles have abstracts in African languages, ranging from Arabic to Zulu.

The future

Over the coming months, we will be working to get the journal indexed in all relevant places, so that its reputation will grow. This also depends on *you*, our first readers: if you think what we are publishing is relevant, do use the means at your disposal to promote the journal and its contents! That way, we hope to receive an increasing number of contributions.

After this issue, articles will be published online first as soon as they have been accepted and finalised – and then they will be grouped into issues and volumes. Our thinking now is that we may be able to publish two issues a year, but this will depend on the quality and volume of contributions and also on the speed with which we will be able to manage the review process. For the time being, we accept submissions in English and French; moreover, scientific publications in African languages are also encouraged. However, this will only be possible if we find experts who are committed to a double-blind academic peer review process in these languages.

There is space in the Journal for review and research articles, as well as book reviews and opinion pieces (in our *Forum* section). We hope to become part of a dynamic process, which can only grow in importance, as outlined in our theoretical and practical considerations above. We invite you to be part of it!

A bit of thanks

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