

Language as a Tool of Neocolonialism

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Abstract

This paper is about how language has been employed as a tool of neocolonialism in Africa. Indeed, language is not just a medium of communication but also a powerful tool of cultural identity and political control. In postcolonial contexts, particularly in Africa and Asia, the retention and promotion of colonial languages by former colonial powers continue to influence societal structures. This linguistic legacy is seen as a form of neocolonialism, whereby control and dependency are maintained not through force but through language and culture. The continued dominance of colonial languages like English, French, and Portuguese in former colonies perpetuates a cultural and intellectual hierarchy. In a neocolonial sense, languages such as English, French, Portuguese are used to assert cultural superiority, with (un)intentional motives of subjugating other cultures. This dominance marginalizes indigenous languages and cultures, maintains economic inequalities, and reinforces the power dynamics established during the colonial period. This scenario fosters a form of neocolonialism whereby former colonial masters continue to exert influence on the colonized through linguistic and cultural dominance.

Keywords: Neocolonialism, Language, Cultural Dominance, Linguistic Legacy, Educational Systems, Deneocoloniality

Introduction

The dominance of colonial languages is also manifest in the African education system in terms of curriculum design and medium of imparting knowledge. It also extends into government and administrative functions. In many postcolonial African states, colonial languages continue to serve as the official languages in legislative, judicial and bureaucratic processes (Kamwangamalu, 2016). The continued use of these languages in government reinforces existing power structures by excluding those who are not proficient in them from full participation in civic life. This is especially problematic in legal settings where proceedings and documents are often conducted in colonial languages, thereby disenfranchising those unable to afford legal representation or translation services. It has been noted that this linguistic exclusivity undermines democratic participation and perpetuates linguistic elitism, as only a minority fluent in colonial languages can effectively engage with the state apparatus. Additionally, the perception that indigenous languages are incapable of managing modern governance further entrenches

neocolonial hierarchies.

This paper critically examines how colonial languages serve as tools of neocolonialism in postcolonial societies. It seeks to uncover the mechanisms through which languages reinforce neocolonial structures and to explore strategies for linguistic deneocolonization that can foster greater cultural autonomy and social justice. The paper is essential as it is capable of exposing the purpose of elevating foreign languages over Africa's indigenous languages and its profound effects on Africans. This study is also crucial to elicit an understanding of how language is being used as a weapon to perpetuate neocolonialism at all levels (education, administration/government, commerce, etc.) in most African countries. African languages are conceptualized especially by Westerners who purposely elevated their own languages to achieve their colonial agenda.

In other parts of the paper, the explication of main notions such as how languages serve as a tool for achieving neocolonialism is undertaken by using relevant literature. The paper also discusses the theoretical framework that underpins the connectedness of language and neocolonialism in the African context. The other part of this study presents some case studies and analyses of how colonial languages are used as tools of neocolonialism in Africa and examines the consequences of linguistic neocolonialism and the challenges it poses to postcolonial societies. Lastly, the paper summarizes the findings and makes some recommendations.

Conceptualizations of Neocolonialism, Language, Power, and Education

The legacy of colonialism has profoundly shaped education systems in postcolonial nations, with language playing a contentious role. In many African countries, such as Nigeria, colonial languages like English have continued to dominate as the medium of instruction in schools, despite the fact that these are not the native languages of most students (Montero, 2017; Kramsch, 2019). This linguistic hegemony impacts educational access, equality and the preservation of cultural diversity, thereby privileging colonial languages while marginalizing indigenous ones. This phenomenon sustains social hierarchies and contributes to cultural alienation in postcolonial societies (Phillipson, 1992; Pennycook, 1998).

Neocolonialism, as described by Nkrumah (1965), involves the continued control of former colonies through economic, cultural and linguistic dominance rather than direct political rule. In Africa, colonial languages continue to dominate sectors like education, governance, and commerce. This linguistic dominance perpetuates Western control and deepens socioeconomic inequalities, since access to power and resources is still tied to proficiency in these colonial languages (Bhabha, 1994; Phillipson, 1992).

Language is not merely a tool of communication but also a medium for expressing cultural identity and exerting power. In postcolonial Africa, the use of colonial languages reinforces historical power structures and marginalizes local languages and cultures (Thiong'o, 1986). These languages are often seen as superior and, thus, used to shape educational curricula and governance practices while maintaining global hierarchies and impeding efforts to decolonize knowledge and cultural identities (Pennycook, 1998). The role of power in language becomes evident in how colonial languages continue to consolidate power among elites in postcolonial African societies. Proficiency in these languages grants access to better educational and economic opportunities, while those who primarily speak indigenous languages are

disenfranchised (Brock-Utne, 2017; Phillipson, 1992). This situation reinforces the power dynamics established during the colonial era by limiting social mobility and access to resources for non-elite groups (Kamwangamalu, 2001).

Education remains one of the most critical arenas where the legacy of colonialism continues to exert influence. In many African countries, colonial languages are still the primary medium of instruction, which disadvantages students who speak indigenous languages at home. The use of these colonial languages often deepens socioeconomic divisions, as only those proficient in them can access higher education and better job opportunities (Heugh, 2011). This focus on colonial languages also undermines the development and intellectualization of indigenous languages and contributes to cultural alienation (Thiong'o, 1986; Prah, 2009).

Recent scholarship highlights how the continued use of colonial languages in education perpetuates neocolonial structures. Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o (1986) argues that imposing colonial languages sustains the “mental domination” of the colonized. In Nigeria, the overemphasis on English has been linked to lower student comprehension and high dropout rates, especially among those from non-English-speaking backgrounds (Coyne, 2015). This reveals how the primacy of colonial languages in education systems hinders progress and exacerbates social inequalities.

One potential solution is the use of “translanguaging” as a pedagogical approach. This method involves the flexible and strategic use of multiple languages in education and allowing students to leverage their linguistic repertoires for learning. Translanguaging has been championed as a tool for decolonizing education and empowering students, particularly in multilingual societies like Nigeria (Meighan, 2022). By incorporating indigenous languages alongside colonial ones, translanguaging can promote educational equality and preserve linguistic diversity (Adedigba et al., 2023).

The potential of translanguaging to elevate African languages in education is significant. Implementing such strategies can increase educational access, enhance learning outcomes, and promote the recognition of indigenous languages in public life, thereby contributing to cultural pride and national development (Akinpelu, 2020). Nonetheless, its implementation faces challenges. Entrenched language ideologies which prioritize standardized forms of colonial languages and the lack of educational materials in indigenous languages pose barriers to widespread adoption.

Despite these challenges, the benefits of integrating indigenous languages into the education system through translanguaging are immense. Decolonizing the curriculum can foster more inclusive educational outcomes, preserve linguistic diversity, and empower students to embrace their cultural heritage. As language shapes social structures and power dynamics, promoting linguistic diversity is essential to dismantling the neocolonial control that continues to influence African societies (Phillipson, 1992; Pennycook, 1998).

Language is inherently linked to power and serves as a tool for exerting and maintaining control. In colonial contexts, Western languages were used to impose cultural dominance and control over colonized societies. Even after formal colonialism ended, these languages remained entrenched in African societies, thereby reinforcing the socioeconomic hierarchies established during the colonial period (Pennycook, 1998; Phillipson, 1992). As a result, access to governance, education, and economic opportunities often depends on the proficiency in these colonial languages (Makoni and Pennycook, 2007).

Thus, language plays a pivotal role in shaping societal structures, cultural identities, and power dynamics in postcolonial Africa. The continued dominance of colonial languages in

education, governance, and commerce reflects the lingering influence of colonialism. Addressing these inequalities requires deliberate efforts to promote linguistic diversity, including adopting pedagogical approaches like translanguaging, which can deneocolonize education and empower African societies to reclaim their linguistic and cultural identities.

Theoretical Framework and Research Methodology

This study is underpinned by Postcolonial Theory. This theory provides a critical framework for examining the lingering impacts of colonialism on former colonies by focusing particularly on the ways in which language has been used as a tool of control and resistance. Originating from the seminal works of theorists like Frantz Fanon, Edward Said, and Homi Bhabha, Postcolonial Theory explores the complex power dynamics and cultural legacies that colonialism has left behind (Said, 1978; Bhabha, 1994).

Central to this framework is the concept of “Othering,” a process by which colonial powers define themselves as superior to the people they colonize, who are depicted as “the Other”—inferior and fundamentally different. Said’s concept of “Orientalism” is crucial here, as it describes how the West constructed a distorted image of the East as exotic, backward, and irrational, which justified colonial domination and continues to affect postcolonial interactions (Said, 1978).

Moreover, Postcolonial Theory also engages with the issues of language and neocolonialism, as articulated by Thiong'o, who argues that by imposing their language on colonized peoples, colonizers not only restricted the colonized people’s access to their own cultural narratives but also made them estranged in their own lands (Thiong'o, 1986). The retention of colonial languages in postcolonial states is seen as a continued act of cultural imperialism that maintains economic and intellectual dependencies.

This study employs a dual methodology consisting of case studies and empirical reviews designed to comprehensively address the multifaceted impact of language in postcolonial settings. The case study approach is pivotal for this research to allow for an in-depth exploration of specific contexts where colonial languages exert neocolonial influences within diverse African settings. This qualitative method is particularly effective in uncovering the nuanced ways in which language policies affect various sectors such as education, governance, and media. By focusing on detailed instances, the case studies illuminate the persistence of colonial legacies and their modern manifestations in language use (Yin, 2014). The strengths of the case study methodology lie in its depth and specificity in offering detailed insights into complex social phenomena that might be lost in broader surveys. Nonetheless, its limitations include potential challenges in generalizing findings from specific cases to wider contexts due to the unique characteristics of each case.

Complementing the case studies, empirical reviews synthesize existing research to provide a broader landscape of the issue. This systematic review aggregates and analyzes findings from previous studies and identifies overarching patterns and themes, as well as gaps in the current literature on language and neocolonialism (Booth, Sutton and Papaioannou, 2016). This method’s strengths lie in its capacity to consolidate a wide range of data and providing a comprehensive overview that informs and supports the case study findings. Nevertheless, empirical reviews can sometimes struggle with the diversity of study designs, methodologies, and contexts of the original studies, which can introduce variability and affect the cohesiveness of conclusions.

In this study, the combination of case studies and empirical reviews is employed to harness both the depth of individual experiences and the breadth of global patterns. This methodological framework is crucial for examining how colonial languages continue to serve as tools of neocolonial influence and for proposing effective strategies for linguistic deneocolonization. By integrating these approaches, the study aims to offer a robust analysis of the intersections among language, power, and neocolonial legacies and provide nuanced insights that are grounded in both specific case examples and broader scholarly discourse. This methodological synthesis not only deepens the understanding of specific instances, but it also enhances the reliability of the general conclusions drawn from the study, making it a comprehensive examination of languages' role in neocolonialism.

Analysis of Case Studies/ Examples of Related Issues on Language as a Tool for Neocolonialism in Africa

The analysis in this section is divided into three subsections for the sake of clarity. The discussion reflects three case studies.

The Case of Neocolonialism Manifesting in Languages of Media of Instruction and Curricula

Colonial languages often serve as the primary media of instruction as well as languages in which curricula have been designed in many African countries. This is disadvantageous to students who speak indigenous languages at home. This linguistic barrier can hinder academic achievement and limit social mobility, thereby reinforcing cycles of poverty and exclusion. Research consistently shows that students learn best in their mother tongues; yet educational policies in many African nations continue to prioritize colonial languages, thereby maintaining colonial power structures and perpetuating inequalities (Brock-Utne, 2017; Heugh, 2011).

Language is more than just a tool for communication; it is a vital component of cultural identity. The imposition of colonial languages often leads to cultural erosion. Nonetheless, a growing movement resists this linguistic domination by promoting mother-tongue education that incorporates indigenous languages into official functions and celebrate linguistic diversity as part of broader decolonization efforts (Thiong'o, 1986; Phillipson, 2009). Understanding how colonial languages perpetuate power imbalances and socioeconomic inequalities is crucial. Policymakers and educators can promote linguistic equality and revitalize indigenous languages to foster a more inclusive and just society.

Empirical evidence supports the assertion that colonial languages have maintained elite status, often at the expense of indigenous languages. In many African nations, educational and governmental institutions prioritize European languages to align with the former colonial powers' broader economic and geopolitical interests (Makoni and Mashiri, 2007). This dynamic benefits the socio-economic elites, reinforces class structures, and limits social mobility for those not fluent in these languages (Pennycook, 1998). For instance, income inequality tends to be higher in countries where colonial languages remain the primary media of instruction, further entrenching social and economic disparities (Coyne, 2015).

The preference for colonial languages in education is a contentious issue. Critics argue that it is a form of linguistic imperialism that entrenches unequal power relations and hinders the development of indigenous languages. For example, in countries like Kenya, Nigeria, and

Cameroon, the dominance of colonial languages has established significant barriers to learning, particularly for marginalized groups that do not speak these languages as their mother tongue. In Nigeria, the overemphasis on English has been linked to lower educational outcomes and the marginalization of local languages, which further exacerbates social inequalities (Akinpelu, 2020).

The issue of language in education is also closely tied to broader economic inequality. Studies across 33 African countries indicate that where colonial languages are the primary media of instruction, income inequality tends to be higher. This suggests that the emphasis on colonial languages in education may further limit social mobility and entrench existing disparities (Coyne, 2015). Also, local languages are often seen as less commercially viable, particularly in industries such as publishing, further marginalizing them and depriving many Africans of access to higher education and employment opportunities (Seema, 2016).

Some researchers have explored the detrimental effects of the continued colonial language dominance on educational systems in African countries. For instance, in Kenya, the use of English as the primary instructional language has led to barriers to participation and learning, particularly for marginalized groups. Similarly, in Cameroon, the linguistic landscape is complicated by the competition between English and French, the two colonial languages. These cases highlight the challenges faced by African countries in overcoming the legacy of colonialism and developing more inclusive and equitable language policies.

In Nigeria, the use of English as the primary medium of instruction has long-standing consequences. Most Nigerian children do not speak English as their first language, leading to significant obstacles in learning and comprehension. This has been described as a form of “subtractive education” wherein the use of an unfamiliar language as the medium of instruction negatively impacts students’ educational outcomes (Worthy et al., 2003). Research indicates that mother-tongue instruction could lead to more positive educational results by allowing students to leverage their existing linguistic skills. Nonetheless, in Nigeria, there has been an inconsistent approach to balancing local and colonial languages in education (Muhammad, 2018).

Critics of the neocolonial language framework caution that focusing solely on colonial languages might oversimplify the complexities of postcolonial societies. For instance, scholars like Blommaert (1999) argue that language dynamics in postcolonial contexts reflect internal decisions and policies, not just neocolonial influence. Additionally, local populations have agency in adopting and reshaping colonial languages to serve their own interests (Canagarajah, 1999). While colonial languages indeed play a role in perpetuating neocolonial structures, they also offer opportunities for postcolonial societies to engage in global markets and diplomacy (Spivak, 1993). Thus, a balanced view considers both the constraints and opportunities these languages present.

This synthesis underscores the need to view language as both a tool of neocolonialism and an adaptive strategy in postcolonial societies. Analyzing these dynamics through Postcolonial Theory can illuminate the ongoing impacts of colonial languages on education and governance and offer insights into potential pathways toward deneocolonization and linguistic empowerment. By fostering multilingual frameworks that respect linguistic diversity and promote social equality, policymakers can challenge the neocolonial legacy and support more inclusive development in African societies.

The Case of Language as a Colonial Tool in African Language Policy

Language was a central tool of control, manipulation, and identity formation in colonial contexts. In Africa, the imposition of colonial languages was not merely a matter of convenience for colonial administrators but a deliberate strategy to reinforce dominance over indigenous populations. By manipulating language policies, colonial powers shaped the educational systems, governance structures, and social hierarchies in a way that privileged the colonizers' languages and marginalized indigenous languages. This subsection examines the case of how language was used as a colonial tool in African language policies, with a particular focus on the long-term impact of these policies in the postcolonial era and efforts to reform them in contemporary African societies.

During the colonial period, European powers systematically used language policies to consolidate their administrative control over African territories. The language policy approaches varied among colonial powers, each adapting its strategies to fit its broader colonial objectives. For example, French colonialism was characterized by its assimilationist language policy. The French believed that the spread of French culture, values, and language would help establish a class of colonized elites who identified with French culture and, therefore, facilitated France's control. The French colonial government imposed French as the official language of education, administration, and public life, leaving indigenous languages with little to no formal role in governance or education (Heine, 1990). This practice created a hierarchy whereby proficiency in French became synonymous with access to power, wealth, and higher social status, thereby marginalizing those who could only speak indigenous languages.

In contrast, the British colonial language policy was more flexible and varied across different colonies, reflecting the British preference for indirect rule. In many British colonies, indigenous languages were used at lower levels of education and local governance, particularly in rural areas where the colonial administrators relied on local chiefs and indigenous elites to maintain control. English, however, remained the language of higher education, formal administration, and inter-regional communication (Kamwangamalu, 2001). This strategy allowed the British to govern vast and linguistically diverse territories with minimal direct intervention. Nonetheless, it reinforced the perception that indigenous languages were inferior to English and relegated the former to informal and subordinate roles in society.

The Portuguese and Belgian colonial powers adopted similarly restrictive language policies by imposing Portuguese and French, respectively, as the languages of administration and education in their African territories (Phillipson, 1992). In all these cases, the use of the colonial language was essential in establishing a social stratification system whereby the colonizers' languages became the markers of education, class, and prestige, while African languages were seen as primitive or backward.

Following independence, African nations faced the challenge of developing new language policies that could foster national unity while also addressing the linguistic diversity within their borders. Despite the political independence gained from colonial powers, many African countries retained the colonial languages as their official languages. This decision was often justified by the need for a neutral language to mediate among the various ethnic and linguistic groups within a country. For example, in Nigeria, with over 500 languages, English was maintained as the official language to avoid privileging any single indigenous language over others and to ensure access to international communication and trade (Phillipson, 1992).

Nevertheless, the retention of colonial languages has been criticized for perpetuating the

colonial legacy and hindering the development of indigenous languages. Scholars such as Phillipson (1992) have argued that the continued dominance of European languages in African governance and education reflects a form of linguistic imperialism that sustains neocolonial dependence. Colonial languages, by virtue of their international prestige and economic utility, continue to hold a privileged position in African societies, often at the expense of indigenous languages, which remain marginalized in formal domains. This establishes a situation whereby only those who are proficient in the colonial languages can fully participate in the political, economic and social life of a nation, thereby excluding large segments of the population that are more comfortable in their indigenous languages.

In Kenya, English serves as the official language and the primary medium of instruction in schools, reflecting its colonial legacy under British rule. Despite numerous ethnic groups and languages, English dominates the educational and administrative sectors. This has significant implications for linguistic and cultural identity, as many students are forced to learn in a language that is not their mother tongue, which can hinder academic performance and engagement (Oduor and Kipsang, 2017). The persistent use of English has been critiqued for maintaining socioeconomic inequalities, as proficiency in English is often required for high-status jobs and further education opportunities (Muthwii, 2004).

Senegal's language policy presents a different scenario, with French as the official language inherited from colonial times. Although French is used in administration and education, the government has recognized the importance of promoting indigenous languages such as Wolof, which is widely spoken by the population. Efforts have been made to incorporate Wolof and other national languages into the education system, aiming to improve literacy rates and educational outcomes (Seck, 2016). Nonetheless, the dominance of French continues to erect barriers to economic and social mobility for those not fluent in the language, thereby perpetuating a form of linguistic neocolonialism. Cameroon presents a unique case with its bilingual policy of English and French, reflecting its colonial history under both British and French rule. The country's educational system is divided along linguistic lines, with distinct English-speaking and French-speaking regions. This division has led to significant political and social tensions, as the Anglophone minority often feels marginalized by the Francophone-dominated government. The recent Anglophone crisis highlights the deep-rooted issues of linguistic discrimination and the challenges of implementing a truly bilingual policy (Yuka, 2018).

The comparative analysis of Kenya, Senegal, and Cameroon reveals both commonalities and divergences in how colonial languages continue to function as tools of neocolonialism. In all three countries, the use of colonial languages in education and administration reinforces socioeconomic hierarchies and limits access to opportunities for those who are not proficient in these languages. This perpetuates a form of intellectual and economic imperialism, as individuals from privileged backgrounds, often with better access to colonial language education, maintain advantages over others (Bamgbose, 2000).

Despite the commonalities, each country has taken different approaches to managing its linguistic landscape. Kenya's focus on English, Senegal's promotion of indigenous languages alongside French, and Cameroon's bilingual policy illustrate varied strategies and their respective challenges. Senegal's efforts to elevate indigenous languages show a promising path toward linguistic inclusivity, although implementation remains inconsistent. In contrast, Cameroon's bilingual policy underscores the complexities and potential conflicts arising from linguistic dualism, especially in a politically divided context (Heine and Kuteva, 2018).

These case studies underscore the importance of context-specific approaches to language policy in postcolonial settings. While colonial languages continue to wield significant influence, efforts to promote linguistic diversity and equity can help mitigate their neocolonial impact. In response to these criticisms, several African countries have made efforts to develop language policies that promote bilingualism or multilingualism, giving official recognition to both colonial and indigenous languages. These policies reflect a growing awareness of the importance of linguistic diversity for cultural identity, national unity, and social inclusion. For instance, South Africa's post-apartheid constitution recognizes 11 official languages, including English, Afrikaans, and nine indigenous African languages, as part of its commitment to promoting equality and redressing the injustices of the past (Kamwangamalu, 2001).

Similarly, countries like Kenya, Tanzania, and Ethiopia have made strides in promoting the use of indigenous languages in education and public life. Tanzania, under the leadership of Julius Nyerere, implemented a policy of using Kiswahili, an indigenous lingua franca, as the language of education and administration, alongside English. Nyerere's policy was aimed at promoting national unity and cultural pride, while also ensuring that education was accessible to the majority of Tanzanians who spoke Kiswahili. This policy stands in contrast to many other African nations where education is still primarily conducted in colonial languages, often to the detriment of students who are more proficient in their indigenous languages.

Kenya has also taken steps to promote the use of indigenous languages, particularly in early childhood education. The Kenyan government recognizes the importance of mother-tongue education in improving literacy rates and learning outcomes, particularly in rural areas where many children enter school speaking only their indigenous languages. Nonetheless, the implementation of these policies has been inconsistent, and English remains the dominant language of instruction in secondary and higher education, reflecting the persistent influence of colonial language policies.

Despite the efforts to promote indigenous languages, there are significant challenges associated with the implementation of multilingual language policies in African countries. One of the primary challenges is the lack of resources and infrastructure needed to support education and public communication in multiple languages. Developing educational materials, training teachers, and generating official documents in indigenous languages require substantial financial investment, which many African countries, burdened by economic constraints and other developmental challenges, may struggle to provide.

Additionally, there is often a lack of consensus on which indigenous languages should be promoted, particularly in countries with large and linguistically diverse populations. For instance, in Nigeria, while English is maintained as the official language, there are ongoing debates about the status of major indigenous languages like Hausa, Yoruba, and Igbo, and whether they should be elevated to official language status. These debates are complicated by ethnic tensions and fears that promoting one language over others could lead to political and social instability (Kamwangamalu, 2001).

Moreover, there is the challenge of global economic integration, which often incentivizes the continued use of European languages. In many African countries, proficiency in a colonial language is seen as essential for accessing higher education, employment opportunities, and international markets. As a result, parents and policymakers may prioritize the learning of colonial languages over indigenous languages, even in contexts where there is strong rhetorical support for linguistic decolonization.

The legacy of colonial language policies in Africa illustrates the deep connection between

language, power, and identity. In colonial contexts, language was used as a tool of domination, with the colonizer's language imposed as a symbol of authority and control. In the postcolonial era, language remains a key aspect of struggle, as African countries seek to redefine their linguistic landscapes in ways that promote national unity, cultural autonomy, and social inclusion.

Nevertheless, the persistence of colonial languages as the primary media of governance and education reflects the enduring power dynamics of the colonial era. While there have been important efforts to promote indigenous languages, these efforts have been met with significant challenges, both practical and ideological. The continued dominance of European languages in many African societies raises important questions about the possibilities and limits of linguistic deneocolonization. Can African countries fully break away from the linguistic legacies of colonialism, or will the economic and political realities of the globalized world necessitate the continued use of colonial languages?

The use of language as a colonial tool in African language policy left a lasting impact on the linguistic, social and political landscapes of the continent. Colonial language policies not only marginalized indigenous languages, but they also gave rise to a linguistic hierarchy that persists to this day. While there have been significant efforts to promote indigenous languages in the postcolonial period, the challenges of implementation, resource constraints, and global economic pressures have made it difficult for many African countries to fully embrace linguistic diversity. As African nations continue to navigate the complexities of language policy in the 21st Century, the struggle for linguistic decolonization remains a crucial aspect of the broader struggle for cultural autonomy and national identity.

The Case of Colonial Languages as the Language of Government and Commerce in African Countries

Colonialism significantly shaped language policy in Africa, with the languages of European powers becoming entrenched in the administration and economic systems. The imposition of colonial languages—primarily English, French, and Portuguese—served as tools for governance, commerce, and education. These languages were not just meant for communication; they also represented power and control and perpetuated the colonial hierarchy and leaving a legacy that continues to influence African nations today. The case study here broaches how colonial languages became dominant in governance and commerce in Africa, their impact on postcolonial development, and ongoing challenges in addressing this linguistic legacy. During the colonial period, European powers strategically imposed their languages to facilitate administrative control. The French, British, and Portuguese colonial powers all employed language as a tool for consolidating their rule, although their approaches differed. In French colonies, the policy of “assimilation” aimed to make Africans French in every aspect, including language. French was the exclusive language of governance, commerce, and education, thereby relegating African languages to informal, domestic spheres. This policy was rooted in the belief that promoting French would foster a sense of cultural and political unity within the empire (Lisanza and Muaka, 2023).

British colonialism, by contrast, adopted a more flexible approach, particularly in East and West Africa where the strategy of indirect rule allowed for some use of indigenous languages at local levels of governance. Nevertheless, English was maintained as the primary language of the central government and commerce. The British colonial administration viewed

English as a unifying tool in linguistically diverse territories such as Nigeria and Kenya where hundreds of languages coexisted (Kamwangamalu, 2001). English became the language of the elites, necessary for participation in governance, education, and trade. Portuguese colonies such as Mozambique and Angola followed a similar path, whereby Portuguese became the sole language of governance, with little regard for indigenous languages. The imposition of these languages effectively disenfranchised large segments of the population that were not fluent in the colonial language and reinforced social hierarchies based on language proficiency.

Additionally, the perception that indigenous languages are incapable of managing modern governance further entrenches neocolonial hierarchies. This view benefits socioeconomic elites who use colonial languages to maintain their status and marginalize indigenous language speakers (Makoni and Mashiri, 2007). The continued marginalization of indigenous languages in governance and policy-making reflects a broader cultural devaluation, whereby local knowledge systems and cultural expressions are seen as inferior to Western paradigms. This limits not only political participation but also the ability of postcolonial states to assert cultural sovereignty.

Also, in terms of governance, colonial languages became entrenched in commerce across African nations. The European languages used in administration were also the media of trade, particularly in international markets. This trend has continued in the postcolonial era, whereby countries like Nigeria, Ghana, and Kenya use English as the language of business and international diplomacy, while French remains dominant in former French colonies such as Senegal, Côte d'Ivoire, and Cameroon. This has positioned former colonial languages as indispensable for economic advancement, both within African countries and in their interactions with the global market.

The retention of colonial languages in commerce can be linked to the perceived economic advantages these languages offer. English and French as global languages provide access to international trade, finance, and diplomacy. For many African nations, maintaining colonial languages is seen as a practical necessity for engaging in global commerce. As a result, colonial languages often overshadow indigenous languages in economic sectors, further entrenching their dominance in postcolonial economies.

Economically, the dominance of colonial languages generates a significant division. Proficiency in these languages is often a requirement for access to high-paying jobs and participation in international business, which further entrenches socioeconomic inequalities (Phillipson, 2009). Heine and Kuteva (2018) argue that the linguistic division impedes broader economic development by excluding large segments of a population from formal economic sectors. In contrast, local businesses that operate in indigenous languages can foster community ties and promote economic growth at the grassroots level. The reliance on colonial languages for international trade, however, reinforces economic dependencies on former colonial powers, thereby maintaining neocolonial economic structures.

In response to the continued dominance of colonial languages, some African countries have implemented reforms aimed at promoting multilingualism and elevating the status of indigenous languages. As mentioned earlier, South Africa's post-apartheid constitution, for example, recognizes 11 official languages, including English, Afrikaans, and nine indigenous African languages. This policy is part of a broader effort to redress the linguistic and cultural marginalization experienced under apartheid and colonialism (Kamwangamalu, 2021). Similarly, Tanzania has promoted Kiswahili as a national language, using it in governance, education, and commerce alongside English.

Most of the other African countries, however, have struggled to implement effective language reforms. In Nigeria, as noted earlier, the government has attempted to promote the use of major indigenous languages like Hausa, Yoruba, and Igbo in education and media, but English remains dominant in government and business. The lack of resources for developing educational materials and training teachers in indigenous languages has been a significant barrier to these efforts. Also, the political and social complexities of choosing which indigenous languages to promote, particularly in multilingual countries, have led to tensions and conflicts (Oduor and Kipsang, 2024).

Another challenge, as mentioned earlier, is the lack of resources and political will to implement meaningful language reforms. Developing the infrastructure needed to support education, governance, and commerce in multiple languages requires significant investment in teacher training, curriculum development, and public communication. In many African countries, where resources are already stretched thin, language reforms are often seen as a lower priority compared to other pressing issues like poverty reduction and healthcare.

In sum, the future of language policy in Africa will depend on finding a balance between maintaining the practical advantages of colonial languages in global commerce and governance, and promoting indigenous languages to foster cultural identity, social inclusion, and national unity. This will require not only political will but also substantial investment in education, public communication, and infrastructure. As African nations continue to navigate the complexities of postcolonial development, language policy will remain a crucial area of struggle and reform vis-à-vis deneocoloniality.

Conclusions and Recommendations

The persistence of colonial languages such as English, French, and Portuguese in African countries underscores the role of language as a tool of neocolonialism. These languages continue to dominate in key areas such as governance, education, and commerce, thereby maintaining power imbalances that originated during the colonial period. The marginalization of indigenous languages not only perpetuates socioeconomic inequalities but also undermines cultural identity and autonomy. This linguistic hierarchy, where proficiency in a colonial language is often synonymous with access to better education and job opportunities, reinforces the legacy of colonial control and limits social mobility for non-elite groups.

Despite these challenges, there are growing efforts to deneocolonize language practices. Initiatives promoting multilingualism, mother-tongue education, and the official recognition of indigenous languages are crucial steps toward fostering linguistic equity and cultural diversity. Countries like South Africa and Tanzania have led by example by integrating indigenous languages into their educational systems and official discourses. Nevertheless, the road to full linguistic deneocolonization is fraught with obstacles, including economic constraints, global pressures to maintain colonial languages for international commerce, and the lack of political will in many African nations. Nonetheless, these efforts highlight the importance of reclaiming linguistic and cultural identity in the pursuit of social justice and national unity. In doing so, African societies can gradually dismantle the neocolonial structures that have persisted through the continued dominance of colonial languages. By prioritizing the promotion of indigenous languages, governments can work toward more inclusive societies that respect and preserve linguistic diversity while challenging the enduring impacts of neocolonialism.

Based on the preceding conclusions, a number of recommendations are suggested. First,

African governments must officially recognize indigenous languages and incorporate them into formal sectors such as governance, judiciary, and administration. This will validate the languages and foster their use in both public and private sectors (Kamwangamalu, 2016).

Second, language policies should promote indigenous languages alongside colonial ones. This includes mandating their use in public services, signage, media, and government communications to normalize these languages in everyday life and promote linguistic equity (Heine and Kuteva, 2018).

Third, African governments and international bodies should collaborate to fund the development of dictionaries, orthographies, and educational materials in indigenous languages. This effort will preserve languages at risk of extinction and ensure their revitalization.

Fourth, implementing mother-tongue education in primary schools and adopting bilingual models are essential for improving literacy, cognitive development, and cultural identity. Teacher training programs should therefore be expanded to support these initiatives (Heugh, 2011; Muthwii, 2004).

Fifth, curricula should integrate indigenous languages and cultural studies. Educational materials must be developed in local languages, with teachers trained to incorporate culturally responsive teaching methods. This strategy will foster linguistic pride and preserve cultural knowledge (Prah, 2009).

Sixth, encouraging community participation in language revival efforts is vital. Cultural movements should be supported to promote indigenous languages in media, literature, and the arts to reinforce pride in the African linguistic heritage (Thiong'o, 1986).

Seventh and finally, global organizations like UNESCO should partner with African governments to provide technical and financial support for linguistic decolonization initiatives. Sharing best practices and resources can further strengthen these efforts (Phillipson, 2009).

Indeed, the preceding recommendations underscore the importance of political will, investment, and international collaboration in achieving linguistic decolonization. They are imperative for fostering cultural diversity and promoting social inclusion across postcolonial African societies.

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