

# **Linguistics and Languages**

## **Decolonizing Multilingualism in Africa: Recentering Silenced Voices from the Global South**

©Pamela Anyango Oloo and Lilian Achieng Magonya

Maseno University,  
Maseno Township, Kisumu County, Kenya



The book titled *Decolonizing Multilingualism in Africa: Recentering Silenced Voices from the Global South* is coauthored by Finex Ndhlovu and Leketi Makalela. Born in Zimbabwe, Ndhlovu is an Ndebele Language specialist. He holds Bachelor of Arts, Masters of Arts and Philosophy Doctorate in Linguistics degrees from Monash University in Australia. He is Associate Professor of Language in Society in the Linguistics Programme of the School of Behavioral, Cognitive and Social Sciences at the University of New England in Australia. He had been an adjunct research assistant in the School of Languages, Cultures and Linguistics at Monash University and previously served as Senior Lecturer at the University of Fort Hare in South Africa. He has held a post-graduate Research Fellowship at the Institute of Community, Ethnicity and Policy Alternatives at Victoria University in Melbourne, Australia and has been a lecturer in African Languages and Cultures at the Midlands State University in Zimbabwe and Lecturer in English and Communication Studies at the Zimbabwe Open University. He has published seven books and over 70 articles in reputable journals in the areas of language policy and politics, cross-border languages, transnational identities, language and identity, exclusion discourse, African Diaspora identities, language development and identity formation, language in education, intercultural communication, and critical cultural literacy. He is active in the areas of language policy and identity issues in Africa, with research interests that cut across Sociolinguistics and Applied Linguistics (Amazon.com, 2021; The Conversation, 2021; Multilingual Matters, 2021; University of New England, 2021 ).

Leketi Makalela holds a Master in Applied Linguistics degree from the University of Witwatersrand in South Africa and a Philosophy Doctora in Applied Language Studies degree from Michigan State University in the United States. He is Professor of Languages and Literacies at the University of Witwatersrand in South Africa where he currently heads the Division of Languages, Literacies and Literature domiciled under the School of Education. Makelela is also the founder of Hub 4 Multilingual Education Literacies (HUMEL) and the chair of Multilingual Education for Social Exclusion. He is the director of the Wits Abafunde-bahlalefe Multilingual Literacies Programme (WAMLip) which seeks to document and support reading and writing development in English and African languages. His areas of specialization include English Studies, Literacy and Linguistics, with research interests in the areas of translanguaging, African multilingualism, African languages and literacies. His multilingualism research is credited with developing a theoretical framework of Ubuntu translanguaging premised on the thesis that languages are interdependent on each other; hence, no language is

fully complete. He has published extensively (Taylor and Francis online, 2021; Goodreads, 2021; Trialogue, 2021).

### **Book Review**

The book comprises nine chapters which deal with issues of multilingualism with a keen focus on the field of Education. Chapter 1 titled “Myths we Live By: Multilingualism, Colonial Inventions” explores the concepts of multilingualism and brands mythical the colonial notions of African languages. Chapter 2, “Unsettling Colonial Roots of Multilingualism,” focuses on various concerted efforts aimed at disrupting the colonial roots of multilingualism and refocusing multilingualism at the center of human activities and interactions. Chapter 3, “Unsettling Multilingualism in Language and Literacy Education,” focuses on the applications of multiculturalism in education and how this impacts literacy. In Chapter 4, the authors explore how multilingualism can be decolonized in higher education to render it free from the shackles of colonial labeling while Chapter 5 discusses how national language policies can embrace approaches that celebrate and center multilingualism in the African context. Chapter 6 examines African cross-border languages and multilingualism discourse while Chapter 7 explores African multilingualism, immigrants and Diasporas. In an interesting exploration of the manifestation of multilingualism in children, Chapter 8 broaches the concept of multilingualism “from below” by focusing on the language of a seven-year old. Chapter 9 “re-centers silenced lingualism and voices” by seeking to make heard the voices—i.e. ideas—of the marginalized and ignored concept of multilingualism in the African context, submerged in the sea of colonial posturing.

On the whole, the book examines the contemporary conceptualization of multilingualism in Africa with a specific focus on language education and research where Eurocentric ideologies still dictate language choices in the continent. Drawing from narratives in the continent and also in the Diaspora, the book presents a holistic African experience of colonial language policies and their current impacts on various sectors in the continent.

### **Book’s Greatness**

This book reflects an ingenious approach to the issue of multilingualism in the African context. Using colonialism as a backdrop, it revisits colonial myths and narratives oriented around multilingualism in the Global South in its reexamination of the language question in key areas of education, language policies, cross-border languages, language acquisition and development as well as immigrant and Diaspora discourse. According to Multilingual Matters (2011) and Amazon.com (2021), the authors contend that in both monolingual and multilingual societies, ideologies shape language usage in various linguistic domains such as governmental, educational, commercial, and even in the home environment. Apparently, this is the reality in the Global South which is traceable to colonial times. The book draws insights from rich data from Global South communities with the aim of adding authentic African voices to the multilingualism debate in its illustration of how Eurocentric ideologies have continued to shape language in Africa.

The book unearths previously ignored indigenous ideologies on linguistic diversity and makes a significant scholarly contribution to the fields of Sociolinguistics and Applied Linguistics in their contemporary discussions aimed at providing alternative voices to the contentious debates on language diversity in the Global South in the context of linguistic imperialism. In seeking to

re-center the hitherto silenced lingualisms and voices from the Global South, the book clearly unyokes multilingualism from its colonial roots and locates it at the center of core human activities and interactions. Undoubtedly, the book builds on the linguistic imperialism and multilingualism ideologies on Africa advanced by Mazrui and Mazrui (1998) in their seminal publication *The Power of Babel: Language and Governance in the African Experience*. Clearly, the book provides an alternative perspective of method, theory and interpretation in multilingualism across diverse contexts. Scholars interested in African Diaspora and transnational identities, multilingualism and multiculturalism will find this book indispensable in its innovative contribution.

### Conclusions and Recommendations

As previously indicated, earlier linguistic studies were skewed toward European languages and the Global North, since the discipline originated from the West. Nonetheless, as attested in the review, the 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> Centuries witnessed conscious attempts by African scholars to articulate concepts in Theoretical and Applied Linguistics from an African perspective, relocating them to the Global South. Since then, the previously rare linguistic data on African languages can now be used for comparative studies in any Linguistics subfield and related disciplines. Moreover, as attested from the reviewed text, the complexity of languages requires multidisciplinary approaches to present a holistic picture of the underlying factors influencing their use, development, survival, and even present language-specific challenges.

The reviewed work affirms that African scholars fully understand the magnitude of their language problems and equally have solutions to such problems, either by employing pre-existing theories or modifying existing theories to accommodate the diversity of African languages. Thus, continuous research on African languages offers opportunities for African experts to add their voices to theoretical debates on language studies. In so doing, the body of literature will enrich African research, as well as open other venues for linguistic inquiry which demand new approaches in a dynamic research field. Indeed, the human quest for new knowledge is endless; we therefore recommend that more linguistic investigations on African languages still need to be explored to generate new insights on the universals and diversities of our language structures.

### References

- Amazon.com. (2021). Decolonising multilingualism in Africa: Recentring silenced voices from the Global South by Finex Ndhlovu and Leketi Makalela. Retrieved on October 30, 2021 from <https://www.amazon.co.uk/Decolonising-Multilingualism-Africa-Recentering-Silenced/dp/1788923340>
- Goodreads. (2021). Books by Leketi Makalela. Retrieved on October 30, 2021 from [https://www.goodreads.com/author/list/3178239.Leketi\\_Makalela](https://www.goodreads.com/author/list/3178239.Leketi_Makalela)
- Mazrui, A. A. and Mazrui, A. M. (1998). *The Power of Babel: Language and Governance in the African Experience*. Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press.
- Multilingual Matters. (2021) *Decolonising Multilingualism in Africa: Recentring Silenced voices from the Global South* by Finex Ndhlovu and Leketi Makalela. Retrieved on September 20, 2021 from <https://www.multilingual-matters.com/page/detail/?k=9781788923347>

- Ndhlovu, F. and Makalela, L. (2021). *Decolonizing Multilingualism in Africa: Recentring Silenced Voices from the Global South*. Bristol, UK: Blue Ridge Summit.
- Taylor and Francis online. (2021). Uncovering the universals of Ubuntu translanguaging in classroom discourse. Retrieved on October 30, 2021 from <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/19463014.2019.1631198>
- The Conversation. (2021). Professor Finex Ndhlovu. Retrieved on October 30, 2021 from <https://theconversation.com/profiles/finex-ndhlovu-336162>
- Triologue. (2020). Prof. Leketi Makalela, WITS. Retrieved on October 30, 2021 from <https://trialogue.co.za/leketi-makalela/>
- University of New England. (2021). Associate Professor Finex Ndhlovu. Retrieved on October 30, 2021 from <https://www.une.edu.au/staff-profiles/hass/fndhlovu>