Bridging the socioeconomic, cultural and linguistic divides in French-speaking Africa

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Résumé : La langue française en Afrique subsaharienne a longtemps été présentée comme un gage d'unité nationale, un outil de développement et un gain d'humanité. Soixante ans après les indépendances, il reste que très peu de personnes en Afrique dite "francophone" parlent le français (moins de 20% de la population dans la plupart des cas), que les taux d'analphabétisme dans cette langue restent élevés, alors que le potentiel socioéconomique, culturel et linguistique de cette partie du monde n'est pas encore pleinement exploité. Quels sont les ajustements à apporter à la politique linguistique pour assurer la réduction des fractures socio-économiques, culturelles et linguistiques dans cette partie du monde ? Ce chapitre appelle à un changement de paradigme fondé sur une recherche sociolinguistique innovante, pragmatique et pertinente, afin d'influencer l'élaboration des futures politiques linguistiques.

Mots-clés : Sociolinguistique, Afrique francophone, changement de paradigme, recherche opérationnelle.

1 Introduction

Language policy in French-speaking Africa requires a paradigm shift to reduce the official stranglehold of the language of the former colonial power on key development sectors such as education, health, the economy and governance, in order to overcome the current socio-economic, cultural and linguistic vulnerabilities. However, advocating a paradigm shift in language policy-making in sub-Saharan Africa always raises a number of questions : (1) is the objective here to do away with the French language ? (2) How can this be achieved in a multilingual context ?

The first question misses the point ; for this is not about the French language, but about the people of sub-Saharan Africa, about the socio-economic, cultural and linguistic vulnerabilities of people the majority of whom are illiterate in the French language sixty years after the imposition of that language in the key development sectors of education, health, the economy and governance. Advocating a paradigm

shift is simply saying that these people cannot be excluded from knowing how to read and write, from receiving quality education and health, from improving their living conditions and from taking part in the management of their own public affairs (Djité 2021a, 2021b & 2020 ; van Niekerk 2020). Language and language policy-making, although not the sole factors at play here, can significantly contribute to meeting the basic needs of the people.

The history of these people tells us that they have not always spoken French (or English for that matter) ; that the Songhai Empires in the 7th century, the Empire of Mali (sometimes called the Mandingo Empire) founded in the 12th century by Sundjata Keita, the Kingdom of Sosso, the Empire of Ghana (3rd to 13th century), the Empire of Monomotapa or Mwenemutapa (15th to 17th century) did not have to resort to an exogenous language policy ; that Timbuktu Manuscripts (17th to 19th century) were not written in English, Spanish, French, or Portuguese, but in Hausa and Pular, using the Ajami script (Djité 2008). Surely, the fate of the language of the former colonial power cannot take precedence over the pressing need of improving the living conditions of the people of sub-Saharan Africa.

Asking about the fate of the French language in French-speaking Africa also ignores its evolution in this part of the world (Lafage 2002 & 2003 ; Diki-Kidiri 2013 ; Kouadio & Nzi 2017 ; Floquet 2018). If one can only be a Christian, a Muslim or a Jew, nothing stops an individual or a people from having an African language, French and English in their repertoire. No language policy would recommend for individuals to relinquish a language they already speak. As for the second question, the experience of Asian countries, in some cases former English or French colonies, is today very much lauded by multilateral development banks, such as the World Bank, the International Monetary Fund and the African Development Bank, and several African countries, because of the pace and efficiency of their performance towards achieving some of the sustainable development goals, even though they remain deeply attached to their languages and cultures (Djité 2011a & 2011b).

These multilateral institutions and many African countries focus on economic indicators and ignore the language dimension. They should ask whether the language policies and practices of Cambodia, Indonesia, Laos, Malaysia, Myanmar, Singapore and Viet Nam, all of them multilingual countries, have something to do with their economic performances. In what language has China established itself as an economic giant on a global scale ? Is Putonghua, the Mandarin dialect of Beijing, the sole language of education and culture throughout all of the Chinese territories ?

2 Language is not *just* a cultural medium

One would be mistaken to think that language *is* culture. If it is an indispensable medium of culture, language is a conduit of much more than culture ; it is also important for education, health, the economy and governance, which in turn are the pillars of sustainable development (Djité 2021b & 2020). As the following diagram shows, education, health, the economy and governance are in turn interdependent and help strengthen one another. Research has abundantly shown that a good level of education helps improve health, just as good health improves productivity and hence the

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economy at large (Cutler and Lleras-Muney 2014, Patrinos 2016, Ross and Wu 1995, UNESCO 2015), whilst good governance is necessary for political leaders to have a vision for their people, provide them good education and health facilities, as well as a distinct sense of purpose and financial acumen in the delivery and management of public goods.

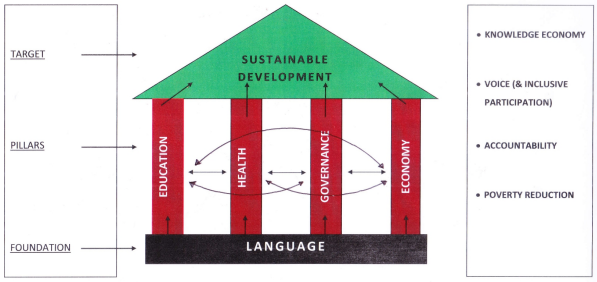


Figure 1. Language as the foundation of sustainable development

Sustainable development is about improving people's capacity to reduce their vulnerabilities. Perhaps this should be rephrased as the capacity of the majority of the people to reduce their vulnerabilities and take their destiny into their own hands by actively participating in the management of their own public affairs. This brings to light the political and ideological dimension of language ; for it is clear that no country in the world has developed in a language other than its own, that language policy must seek to prioritise the interests of the majority over those of a minority[1]

It has been abundantly shown that in so-called "French-speaking" Africa, the language of the former colonial power, sole language of education and administration, is a factor of exclusion, marginalization, fragility, vulnerability and poverty at all levels (Djité 1993) : education (i.e., learning and basic functional training), health (i.e., doctor-patient communication and medical errors, etc.), the economy (i.e., technology transfer, fertilizer application, etc.), governance (i.e., police and justice system, etc.). Indeed, research should eventually be undertaken to assess the full effects of this policy choice, which has been the subject of much debate for decades (Djité 2012 & 2011b).

The experimental approach aimed at reducing and ultimately eradicating world poverty, which has just been recognized by the Nobel Prize, should integrate the historical aspect of decolonization and its burden on the former colonies[2]. Indeed, what would have happened to most East and Southeast Asian nation states, had they adopted a nationist approach to language policy at independence and retained French or English as their sole official language ? What would have been the rates of literacy in Korea, Japan, China, Laos, Turkey and Vietnam had they not changed or simplified their writing systems and/or grammatical structures to facilitate Literacy for All ? African

[1] As was shown by Senegal, where the government bucked the trend and decided to introduce six national languages in parliament in 2014. Cf. Radio France Internationale (RFI) (2014) at http://www.rfi.fr/fr/afrique/20141203-senegal-langues-nationales-font-leur-entree-parlement.

[2] The 2019 Nobel Prize in Economics was awarded to Abhijit Banerjee, Esther Duflo and Michael Kremer on Monday, October 14, 2019.

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economies need to be structurally transformed by massively investing in infrastructure and factories to create added value and jobs for young people and generate more wealth ; but with whom ? (Djité 2011a & 2008). In light of the foregoing, the demographic dividend of the so-called "French-speaking" Africa is a prospect fraught with anguish. Should the status quo remain ? How many more people will die in the Mediterranean by 2050 ? How will the oversized, low (poorly) taxed informal sector (70 to 80% of precarious jobs) be included in the drive for economic growth ?

3 Did you say "inclusive growth" ?

Many leading African institutions believe they have grasped the danger that lies ahead and have sounded the trumpet of the salutary discourse : "inclusive growth". Hence, the African Union, in its Agenda 2063, proposes a blueprint and master plan for eradicating poverty transforming Africa into the global powerhouse of the future and providing opportunities for African people by "putting the means of production in their hands". It prioritises inclusive social and economic development, continental and regional integration, democratic governance and peace and security and speaks of an "integrated, prosperous and peaceful Africa, driven by its own citizens, representing a dynamic force in the international arena" (African Union 2013)[3].

The African Development Bank, on the other hand, talks about five transformative priorities – the High 5s ; namely : (1) Feeding Africa (2) Enlightening Africa (3) Industrializing Africa (4) Integrating Africa, and (5) Improving the quality of life of Africans. The Bank also talks about inclusive growth. A discussion of each of the High 5s follows :

Why is it urgent to Light up and power Africa ?

Because the largest deficit in Africa is in the energy sector, with some 646 million Africans not having access to electricity, especially in low-income countries[4], where electricity coverage can be as low as 23% in rural areas ; and because demand for energy is expected to grow by 93% in the next few years, with an overreliance on environmentally damaging electricity production (i.e., coal-fired power plants).

Why is it urgent to Feed Africa ?

Because agriculture contributes 15% of the continent's GDP and provides 50% of the labour force ; because it is the main source of income for Africa's rural population ; and because more than 70% of Africans depend on it for their livelihoods (AfDB, OECD & UNDP 2017). However, the full potential of this sector has yet to be unlocked, especially with changing trends in consumption habits driven by demographic factors, such as population growth and urbanisation, which are leading to rapidly rising food imports (currently US$35 billion annually and expected to grow to well over US$110 billion by 2025). Because, whilst Africa has 60% of the arable land in the world, it

[3] African heads of state and government signed the 50th Anniversary Solemn Declaration during the Golden Jubilee celebrations of the formation of the OAU /AU in May 2013. The continent intends to achieve this vision within a 50-year period from 2013 to 2063.

[4] See World Bank list of Low-Income Countries at https://www.cipp-meeting.org/upload/Worl_Bank_overview_low_income_countries.pdf. Last accessed on 24 August 2020.

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accounts for only 10% of global food output and can hardly feed itself (AfDB, OECD & UNDP 2017). At the time of writing :

- 77.6% of the Malagasy population lives under the poverty line of $1.90 per day (World Bank 2019, citing last official statistics in 2012).
- Some three million people are in need of immediate food aid in the eight countries of the West African Economic and Monetary Union (WAEMU) space[5].
- The prevalence of Global Acute Malnutrition (a measure of acute malnutrition in refugee children aged between 6 months and 5 years old[6] remains critical in the north of Mali and southeast of Niger.
- According to the World Food Programme, 1.5 million people or 12% of the total population of Niger were affected by food insecurity in 2017 (WFP 2018) and in 2020 1.9 million people were expected to be food insecure (WFP 2019).
- The number of Kenyans in need of emergency food aid in March 2017 had doubled within three months to reach 2.7 million people (IFRC 2017), whilst inflation reached 9% in February 2017, the highest level of inflation the country had experienced for 5 years. The Kenyan humanitarian crisis has affected several other countries in the region, including Somalia, which is experiencing its third famine in less than 30 years ; the present drought has been on-going for five years from 2015 to 2020 (UN OCHA 2020).
- In South Sudan, 57% of the population were projected to face "acute food security or worse" in mid-2019 (UN OCHA 2019), not because of drought but by armed conflict ongoing since December 2013.

Why is it urgent to Industrialise Africa ?

Because the lack of industrialisation is holding back Africa's economies more than five decades after independence, and because the contribution of Africa's manufacturing sector to the continent's GDP declined from 12% in 1980 to 11% in 2013, and has remained stagnant ever since[7]. The huge infrastructure deficit is a major bottleneck for growth. Even though the existing roads and railways carry about 80% of the goods and 90% of the passengers, almost 50% of roads are not paved, and less than 15% of the people have access to all-weather roads. The 84,000-kilometer rail network is in dire need of maintenance. Furthermore, there is little connectivity between the existing 64 ports on the continent, and between these ports and the hinterland, be it by road or by air (AfDB 2017). Air travel between countries of the same sub-region can still

[5] According to a communiqué read on Niger Television on 9 June 2017 on behalf of the Ministers of Agriculture of the West African Economic and Monetary Union (WAEMU). The WAEMU countries are Benin, Burkina Faso, Côte d'Ivoire, Guinea Bissau, Mali, Niger, Senegal, and Togo. They share the same currency of the French African Colonies, the CFA franc, now called the African Financial Community Franc, pegged to the Euro.

[6] See https://emergency.unhcr.org/entry/32604/acute-malnutrition-threshold)

[7] The AfDB plans to launch an industrialisation strategy for Africa, with the goal of increasing the contribution of the manufacturing sector to the continent's GDP from $751 billion to $1.72 trillion within the next decade.

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take longer than air travel from Africa to Europe or the United States. The AfDB (2017) estimates that sub-Saharan Africa needs to invest more than US$93 billion annually over the next decade to bridge its infrastructure gap. Over 60% of this sum is needed for brand new infrastructure, and approximately 30% for the maintenance of existing but decaying infrastructure.

Why is it urgent to Integrate Africa ?

Because, fifty years after the first initiatives, African integration remains largely a work in progress, despite the existence of nearly 160 African regional or continental organisations, not to mention all the small non-governmental organisations, many with overlapping competences ; and no less than 14 regional blocks allowing the free movement of persons, goods and services across member countries ; with some States being members of several of these organisations at once (Jacquemot 2017 ; also *cf.* Oxfam, 2017).

Similarly, many African governments talk about Emergence with various deadlines : 2020, 2025, 2030, when their balances of payments are in horrendous deficit, often coupled with staggering budget deficits and "their productive bases are not only narrow, but inefficient, due in part to [widespread] illiteracy and/or functional illiteracy"[8]. Between the end of 2017 and June 2019, UNICEF reported that, due to increased insecurity in West and Central Africa, 9,272 schools were closed in eight countries in these regions, affecting 1.91 million children and nearly 44,000 teachers (UNICEF 2019).

Despite the mirage of average growth rates of 5%, sub-Saharan Africa is the only region in the world where the population of the extremely poor (less than $1.90 a day, according to the World Bank) has doubled in fifty years to 413 million people or 41.1% of the population of sub-Saharan Africa. As Kako Nubukpo put it in an interview to Le Monde-Afrique (September 2019) "The growth model of African countries is deadly". This is all the more so, because the so-called solutions are not adapted to the challenges of the continent and are delivered, in most part, without understanding African realities and the challenges posed by the thorny issue of language.

It would be wrong to big gripped in the dogma of liberal economics according to which development is double-digit GDP growth and the western model. Indeed, it would be wrong to only look at the results and not at the ideological foundation of these models, for the economy is not just limited to infrastructure, is not meant to be extroverted, and is not independent of language and society. There is no running away from these facts.

4 What are the facts ?

Whilst, according to a new fact sheet from the UNESCO Institute for Statistics, the global literacy rate for adults (15 years and over) reached 86% and for youth (15-24 years) 91% in 2016, 102 million young people and 750 million adults – two-thirds of whom are women – lacked basic reading and writing skills (ISU 2017). Many of

[8] According to a UNICEF report, 1.9 million children are out of school in West and Central Africa due to school closures

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these young people and adults are found in Africa, particularly in French-speaking Africa, as shown in Tables 1 and 2, with non-French-speaking countries having a much higher average literacy rate than the so-called French-speaking countries.

Table 3 shows literacy rates in Southeast Asian countries over the same period (2015). Apart from countries with reliable statistics, such as South Africa, literacy rates in African countries are nowhere near those recorded in Southeast Asian countries (Jerven 2013).

Meanwhile, by 2016-2017, adult literacy rates increased from an average 46% to 72% in South Asia, from 64% to 81% in West Asia and from 82% to 96% in East and Southeast Asia. Similarly, youth literacy rates increased from over 80% to nearly 100% in East and Southeast Asia, from 80% to 90% in West Asia and from 59% to 89% in South Asia[9].

If it is true that there are no universal definitions and standards of literacy, and that all rates are based on the most common definition, that is to say "the ability to read and write at a given age", it is no secret that low levels of (functional) literacy and education in general can hamper and seriously and durably hold back the prospects of sustainable endogenous economic development (Djité 2012 & 1993).

Table 1. The so-called "French-speaking" countries[10]

Countries	Literacy rate (%)	Year
Burundi	86	2015
Gabon	83	2015
Congo	79	2015
DR Congo	77	2016
Cameroon	75	2015
Madagascar	65	2015
Togo	64	2015
Senegal	58	2015
Côte d'Ivoire	43	2015
Benin	38	2015
Central African Rep.	37	2015
Burkina Faso	36	2015
Mali	33	2015
Guinea	30	2015
Chad	22	2016
Niger	19	2015

[9] Cf. "Literacy rates continue to rise from one generation to the next" in UIS Factsheet No. 45, September 2017. Available from http://uis.unesco.org/sites/default/files/documents/fs45-literacy-rates-continue-rise-generation-to-next-en-2017_0.pdf. Last accessed on 28 February 2020.

[10] Adapted from Index Mundi (2019). Available at https://www.indexmundi.com/map/?v=39\&r=af\&l=en. Last accessed on 28 February 2020.

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Table 2. Non-French-speaking countries[11]

Countries	Literacy rate (%)	Year
Equatorial Guinea	95	2015
South Africa	94	2015
Libya	91	2015
Botswana	89	2015
Swaziland	88	2015
Cape Verde	87	2015
Zimbabwe	87	2015
Namibia	82	2015
Tunisia	82	2015
Algeria	80	2015
Lesotho	79	2015
Uganda	78	2015
Kenya	78	2015
Tanzania	78	2015
Ghana	77	2015
Sudan	76	2015
São Tomé and Principe	75	2015
Eritrea	74	2015
Egypt	74	2015
Angola	71	2015
Rwanda	71	2015
Morocco	69	2015
Zambia	63	2015
Malawi	62	2015
Guinea-Bissau	60	2015
Nigeria	60	2015
Mozambique	59	2015
The Gambia	56	2015
Ethiopia	49	2015
Sierra Leone	48	2015
Liberia	48	2015

[11] Although French is still used in some media (newspapers) and schools in Algeria, Morocco and Tunisia, due to these countries' colonial history, it has no official status. Adapted from Index Mundi (2019). Available at https://www.indexmundi.com/map/?v=39\&r=af\&l=en. Last accessed on 28 February 2020.

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Table 3. Southeast Asian Countries.

Countries	Literacy rate (%)	Year
Singapore	97.00	2015
Indonesia	95.38	2015
Malaysia	94.60	2015
Viet Nam	94.50	2015
Laos	84.66	2015
Cambodia	78.30	2015
Myanmar	75.60	2015

5 Key challenge in bridging the divides

The key challenge in bridging the socioeconomic, cultural and linguistic divides in "French-speaking" Africa always lies in the age-old question : "So, what do you propose ?"

Some attempts have been made over the years. For decades, sociolinguistic research in "French-speaking" Africa has sought to find answers in contrastive analyses of local languages *versus* colonial languages and the description of local adoptions and appropriations of colonial languages (see Floquet 2018 ; Lafage 2002 & 2003 and others). A number of studies have explored the theme of "partner languages" (Diki Kidiri 2013), of endangered or dying languages (Batibo 2005 ; Voisin 2017), but very few have looked at language repertoires and vitality (Calvet and Moussirou Mouyama 2000 ; Vigouroux and Mufwene 2008 ; Djité 2008 & 2009). Thirty years later, many continue to rehearse the same comparative analyses (Atsé Ncho 2018 ; Kouadio and Nzi 2017 ; Koffi 2017).

No doubt, the issues here are complex and cannot be reduced to a matter of research focus, nor can they be reduced to language alone ; but it is also true that a lot of time has been wasted on "Chindōgu" or "useless" research, just as it is true that no country in the world has been able to lift its people out of poverty through illiteracy. The fact remains that sixty years later, most people in the so-called "French-speaking" Africa are illiterate in the French language. Improving their choices and quality of life will depend very much not only on the quality of their education, but also, and most importantly, on their access to land ownership, quality health services without the added stress of dealing with medical doctors speaking in foreign tongues, their ability to read and use instructions on a bag of fertilizer for their crops, understand whether they need fertilizers in the first place, make statements at police stations and defend themselves in the courts of law in a language they understand and, more generally, take an active part in the management of their own public affairs. Society at large is therefore justified in expressing a yearning for a pragmatic approach to our human endeavour ; that is why I have always been of the view that ignoring the vitality of the languages people speak in their everyday interactions, and instead expecting them to be functional in a foreign language, is tantamount to robbing them of the opportunity to take their destiny in their own hands (Djité 1985, 1993, 2008, 2009 & 2011).

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The time has therefore come to change paradigms and engage in research that focuses on the people and on their priorities. Actionable sociolinguistic research in the so-called "French-speaking" Africa needs to start asking the questions that matter : What is/are the dominant language(s) at national and regional level ? What is/are the language(s) most likely to "integrate communities and [help] improve the quality of life of the African people"[12] ?

6 Conclusion

Languages are a *praxis* with real consequences on the daily lives of those who speak them, as well as on the lives of those who do not speak them or do not master them enough to break through the glass ceiling of linguistic exclusion and loosen the stranglehold of the French language in sub-Saharan Africa.

Therefore, sociolinguistic research in this part of the world will require a paradigm shift focusing on the inner workings of the lived language experiences of the people ; a paradigm shift that will break out of the mould of contrastive analyses and descriptivism and usher in a critical look at emerging issues closer to home : for instance, "why" and "how" the existing sociolinguistic order needs to be changed, "why" and "how" linguistic openness and societal cohesion can help us break out of vertical authority that imposes a single identity through language. This sort of innovative and pragmatic sociolinguistic research could gain much traction, if it could "piggyback" on the development priorities of some of the leading regional and/or continental institutions, such as the African Development Bank, the Economic Community of West African States or the New Partnership for Africa's Development. These institutions could turn out to be sources of research funding, providing the research projects submitted show their relevance to nation building and regional integration.

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[12] This phrase is literally borrowed from the High 5s of the African Development Bank (AfDB). *Actionable sociolinguistic research can "piggyback" on such priorities and show its relevance in nation building and in regional integration.*

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