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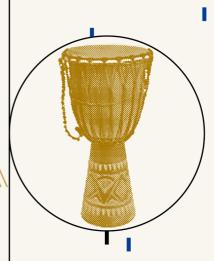# 非洲语言文化研究

From the Margins: Appreciating the African Language Renaissance as Learners of African Languages[①]

Lutz Marten

School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London

Abstract: In the 21st century, several positive trends have led to higher representation of African languages in public discourse, to an increase in positive attitudes and to more wide-spread awareness of the importance of African languages. Against the background of colonial legacies of strong marginalisation and devalorisation of African languages, these trends can be seen as an "African languages renaissance", reconnecting with the historical richness of African languages and harnessing them as a powerful, positive resource for the future. Learners of African languages as second or other languages can be part of this development by harnessing their language skills and learning experience to engage with the linguistic dynamics on the continent and to appreciate this African language renaissance as outside supporters and contributors.

Keywords: Language policy; isiZulu; Otjiherero; African urban youth languages; African Englishes

1　Introduction

Africa is a culturally and linguistically complex, dynamic and rich space. Over 2,000 languages are spoken in Africa, that is almost about a third of the world's languages (Eberhard et al., 2021). In the course of their history, African languages have been associated with and supported periods of expansion, sophisticated polities, and complex patterns of multilingualism. Studying African languages can help us to better understand the history of the people and societies speaking them, and allows learners of African languages as a second or other languages to find their own ways towards the communities, cultures and societies of the continent and in the diaspora.

In this paper, I will first trace some wider trends in the language situation and sociolinguistics of African languages, and show that several positive trends in the 21st century have led to higher representation of African languages in public discourse, to an increase in positive attitudes and to more wide-spread awareness of the importance of African languages. Against the background of colonial legacies of strong marginalisation and devalorisation of African languages, these trends can be seen as an "African languages renaissance", reconnecting with the historical richness of African languages and harnessing them as a powerful, positive resource for the future. Turning to language learners, I will show how their language skills and learning experience allows learners of African languages as other language to engage with the linguistic dynamics on the continent and to appreciate this African language renaissance as outside supporters and contributors.

2　Language policies and public discourses on language in Africa

Fardon and Furniss (2000: xx) observed that "Africans are neither starved of words, nor of ways to use them". African languages have sustained and supported the cultural, social, and economic achievements of the continent for

millennia, and today they are used as vehicles for artistic expression, democratic will-building, academic discourse and a host of other functions. The present-day use of African languages bears testimony to their versatility and depth. However, the introduction of European languages to Africa in the context of colonialization and missionary activities had a profound effect on many African linguistic ecologies. In many instances European languages assumed dominant functions, in particular in public spaces. It is likely that European languages initially became part of established patterns of multilingualism, but then expanded their domains of use. However, the relative success of European languages resulted to a large extent from colonial language policies which typically favoured European languages and systematically devalorised African languages (Phillipson, 1992; Makoni & Pennycook, 2005; Erringtom, 2008; Irvine, 2008; Deumert et al., 2020).

2.1　Colonial language policies

　　Different language policies operated at different times and in different places across colonial Africa, with different roles assigned to African languages. In many instances, language policies were covert, but sometimes we can find more explicit statements, often related to language in education policies. However, all colonial language policies share basic assumptions about the superiority of European over African languages and about essentialist qualities of language, that is an assumed necessary correlation of language and cultural and ethnic identity as expressed in one monolithic speech form. The former assumption is part of a wider colonial narrative about the cultural superiority of Europeans, in an attempt to justify political hegemony over African territories and societies and to undermine African elites. The second assumption is a reflection of European nationalism, which was extended to colonial contexts in an attempt to intellectually and politically measure, categorise, and ultimately "divide and rule" the colonised societies in the context of complex African realities of multiple identities, allegiances, and languages (cf. Makoni &

Pennycook, 2005; Erringtom, 2008; Irvine, 2008; Makoni, 2013).

In many colonial language policies, African languages did not work at all. Colonial administration, public discourse, and education were conducted, at least nominally, in the European languages. A 1925 statement from Senegal illustrates the negative attitude to African languages in education, "Le vice fondamental du système d'enseignement, c'est l'emploi de la langue indigène, langue parlée mais non écrite, comme moyen d'arriver à l'instruction des éleves" (Gaucher, 1968: 107) ("The fundamental problem in the education system is the use of the native language, a spoken but unwritten language, as the means of attaining the teaching of pupils"). The use of African languages in education in this statement is identified as a problem, despite the fact that the majority, if not all children in the education system would speak an African language, and not French, outside of and before coming to school. A reason is offered for the unsuitability of African languages for education, namely that they had no established written form – a problematic claim conceptually and factually in view of the long-established written tradition of many West African languages in Arabic script, or "ajami" (Ngom, 2016; Ngom, 2018). This establishes a hierarchy between written, European languages, suitable for use in education, and (apparently) unwritten African languages, which are unsuitable for this task. As Diallo (2005: 197) notes, "Colonial language policy has persistently aimed at relegating the local languages of the country to the background."

In other colonial contexts, African languages were placed more directly in a hierarchical relation to – that is, below – European languages. British language in education policy in East Africa, for example, adopted a three-tier model, where a local African would be used at the lower levels, a suitable lingua franca of African origin, notable Swahili, might be introduced at the intermediate levels, while the language of the European nation in control – English – would be taught in the upper standards (see e.g. Whiteley, 1969). The underlying language ideology of this model places English firmly on top of the linguistic and educational hierarchy. However, there are pedagogical merits in the

model. Contemporary multilingual education policies often promote a familiar language as the language of instruction, to which further languages are then added gradually, providing children with a learning experience which relates to their linguistic environment, while at the same time fostering multilingual skills (UNESCO Institute for Lifelong Learning, 2010). The tension between ideology and pedagogy which this can bring about was pointedly noted by Albert Luthuli, president of the African National Congress from 1952 to 1967, Nobel Peace Prize winner and professional teacher. In his 1962 autobiography *Let My People Go*, Luthuli recalls how he was initially in favour of the "mother tongue instruction" policies of apartheid South Africa, as they "seemed to represent progressive trends in education" (1962: 36). Only after some public criticism did he take into account the denigrating and divisive political intentions behind the policies, and strongly opposed them on these grounds.

The various arguments deployed in colonial discourses about the nature of African languages and the supremacy of European languages were fundamental to colonial language policies. In many ways, these misconceptions and stereotypes persist and influence public attitudes to African languages up to today, where present-day negative attitudes to the use of African languages in education reflect to some extent the policies of devalorisation of colonial times.

2.2　Post-independence language policies

When from the late 1950s onwards the majority of African countries became politically independent from European colonial domination, questions of language and language policy became important for discourses about national identity of the newly formed states (Simpson, 2008).

Post-independence language policies initially largely continued the course of colonial policies, with some exceptions such as the promotion of Swahili in East Africa (Heine, 1970). For the most part, former colonial languages like English, French, Spanish or Portuguese remained the main languages of official and public discourse. This was due to different reasons. It was partly

due to the lack of resources in African languages and the challenge to develop African languages so that they could be used to promote development, social advancement, and modernity. Another common argument was that European languages were "neutral" in a complex linguistic situation of most African countries and could promote unity and "nation building" by not favouring one African language over another. European languages also received considerable institutional backing – for example, through the British Council and La Francophonie – and at least in the case of English, considerable positive attitudes through its status as the "global language" of the 20th century and associated positive attitudes as the language of education, modernity and social aspiration and advancement.

It took some time after the initial independence phase and the first post-colonial language policies were adopted before critical voices became more prominent. Critical linguists like Kashoki (1990) and Bamgbose (2000) showed that the case for the presumed "neutrality" of ex-colonial languages did not take into account the social bias of languages like English, which were often only available to the social and economic elites, and so these exogenous language policies often contributed to elite-closure. Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o's (1986) influential study *Decolonising the Mind* made a strong plea for the central role of African languages for African cultural, educational and philosophical liberation, and that reliance on ex-colonial languages would not be sufficient for the development of African thought. In South Africa Neville Alexander (1991) attempted to counter colonial era linguistic divisions by proposing unified orthographies and written forms of Nguni and Sotho-Tswana languages, although the idea was eventually not implemented. Ideas like these changed the public and policy discourse on language, and prepared the ground for more progressive policies in the 21st century.

2.3　An African language renaissance

Today, African languages are more prominent publicly than they have

been for the last century. There has been a shift in public perception and official recognition so that we can speak about a "rehabilitation" (Prah, 2002) or an "African language renaissance". This is particularly visible at policy level, in education, and in the symbolic functions of African languages, where African languages have become more prominent in the public visual field and the linguistic landscape (Kamwangamalu, 2008; Legère & Rosendal, 2008; Stroud & Mpendukana, 2009). The use of African languages has been extended to wider domains and African languages have become associated more with positive values of identity and solidarity. For example, African languages are used for advertising and billboards, as well as public health campaigns, such as those addressing the Covid-19 pandemic.

A prominent example of the changed status of African languages is the post-apartheid South African constitution of 1996. In it, eleven languages – including nine African languages – were recognised as official languages, and a whole range of associated legislation and policies were set up to implement the provisions of the constitution, even though subsequently problems with aspects of the implementation have been noted. At the time, this was among the most inclusive and progressive language legislations world-wide (Mesthrie, 2008). Similar inclusive policies are found across the continent. While a European language remains an official language in the vast majority of African states, in 18 out 43 states, an African language is an official language, typically in addition to a European language. The African Union has a strong African languages programme under the leadership of the Academy for African Languages (ACALAN) which promotes language development, capacity building and policy relating to language (Alexander, 2009).

Perhaps the most vigorous discussion on African languages is taking place in the domain of education. It has long been established that children learn best in a language they are familiar with, but it has taken some time for this pedagogical insight to be implemented in policy (UNESCO Institute for Lifelong Learning, 2010). However, recently several African countries have

set up programmes which enable or promote the use of African languages in education. In Uganda, regional and local languages have been used in primary education since 1992. Initially, there were five languages which could be used, and then an increasing number of languages have been added until today, where any Ugandan language can be used in primary education, provided there are sufficient resources – which for many Ugandan languages is a considerable stumbling block (Nakayiza, 2013). In Ethiopia the new federal constitution accords federal states considerable freedom in language and education policies. And in Zambia, the introduction of African languages into the primary curriculum has led to better student performance because "it is easy for a child to link the outdoor experiences to the classroom activities" (*Lusaka Times*, 2018). These developments are encouraging, but in many cases they remain pilot and trial projects, and unevenly rolled out, and often restricted to primary level. More ambitious plans are required to realise the full potential of African languages for education, and to harness the multilingual abilities of many African children through bilingual educational programmes (Maseko, 2014; Gambushe, 2020) or the inclusion of translanguaging (Makelela, 2014; Makelela, 2018).

The renewed public visibility and assertiveness of African languages is underpinned by the speech communities of African languages. Across the continent, speakers of African languages have promoted and supported community languages, especially in the context of language documentation and support for endangered languages, while at the same time, new varieties of language appear on the scene and change the linguistic fabric of many African societies.

Batibo (2005) notes that in many African linguistic ecologies, different languages can be arranged in a three-tier hierarchical model, where European languages are on top in terms of prestige and status, nationally or areally dominant languages are in the middle, and minority or community languages have the lowest status and prestige. In language endangerment contexts, often the target language to which speakers of community languages shift is an African

lingua franca, rather than a European language. In the face of the increasing awareness of language loss, there have been many community responses to language endangerment throughout the continent, where speech communities, language activists, and linguists come together the devise steps to counteract the process of endangerment and implement policies of language support and revitalisation (Lüpke, 2018). There is also often a perceived need to promote and lobby for the use of many well-established African lingua francas such as Yoruba or Luganda (cf. Nabagereka, 2019). For example, Nakayiza (2013: 208), when conducting attitude studies among the Luruuri speaking community in Uganda where there is considerable language shift towards Luganda, notes the following reflective statement of one of the community members: "At first I thought this [Luruuri language activism, LM] was political circus but I have now realised that if I am a Muruuri I have to speak my language Luruuri and I would prefer to use it because it shows who we are. How can I say I am a Muruuri if I cannot speak Luruuri." The statement shows the change of attitude and the link between the language and identity expressed by the speaker. The role of African languages for the construction and expression of identity for individuals, groups and societies is a recurring motif of the African language renaissance, as well as for responses to language endangerment.

While some of African language activism is brought about by language endangerment, another prominent theme in African sociolinguistics is the development and rise of new linguistic varieties. African urban youth languages are evolving in towns and cities across the continent, changing and enriching their linguistic ecologies. Examples of African urban youth languages include Nouchi in Côte d'lvoire, Tsotsitaal or Sepitori in South Africa, and Sheng in Kenya (Hurst-Harosh & Kanana, 2018). These youth languages typically draw on a range of linguistic resources and combine linguistic elements from different languages spoken in the multilingual urban centres of many African countries. While originally restricted to specific speaker groups – in particular younger speakers, but also restricted socially and culturally – in the course

of their development, many African urban youth languages have become much more widely used as languages of wider communication. Sheng, for example, is sometimes seen as an emerging national language of Kenya, since it is free from both the ethnic associations of many African languages in their politicised sociolinguistic context as well as from the social elite associations of English. Being used much beyond its original speaker group, Sheng is now widely used across different sections of Kenyan society and promoted by radio stations and activist groups (Githiora, 2018). The development of African urban youth languages, supported by a demographically exceptionally strong youth population, is likely to significantly change the linguistic situation in many African societies and strengthen the role of African languages within them.

Another source for the development of new varieties is the appropriation of ex-colonial languages, and in particular of English. Having entered African linguistic ecologies, English is often regarded as an African language in its own right, with several distinct regional varieties, including Kenyan English (Buregeya, 2019), South African English (Meshtrie & Hromnik, 2011) and Nigerian Pidgin (Faraclas, 1996). The latter, together with other West African pidgins (e.g. Ayafor & Green, 2017), can be regarded as a distinct variety, only related to English indirectly, yet demonstrating how English has been integrated, adapted and appropriated into the African linguistic landscape. In the field of African literature, the ownership of English has long been contested. Achebe (1965) describes how African writers fashion a "new English" to express their African experiences and make the language their own. The position is often seen in contrast to Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o's (1986) advocacy of African languages as a vehicle of African thought, described above, but the two approaches could also be seen as complementing each other. More recently, the esteemed Nigerian author Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie describes her relationship with English as follows: "My English-speaking is rooted in a Nigerian experience and not in a British or American or Australian one. I have taken ownership of English" (Oxford English Dictionary Release Notes: Nigerian English, 2020; cf. Murphy,

2019). In many instances, then, English has been domesticated, integrated into wider multilingual patterns, and developed into new, distinct African varieties.

2.4 Summary

While African languages have been marginalised and devalorised during the colonial period, over the last few decades their status has been revaluated, and they have become more visible publicly, and have to some extent increased their use and functional domains. Across the continent numerous activities and developments are taking place to contribute to the development of African languages, and the attitudes to African languages have become more positive, to the extent that we can speak about an African language renaissance. Even though, many challenges remain with respect to the fair and equal status of all African languages, the role of African languages in domains such as education and the economy, the endangerment of many community languages, and the continued expansion of English and other European languages in many domains. Taking together, a further effect of the recent dynamics and developments around African languages is that they make the present moment a rewarding time to learn African languages.

3 African languages as second or other languages

Beyond the continent, African languages are found across the world as diaspora and community languages, as well as second or other languages which are learned through self-study or in classroom settings. Both these setting intersect, for example when heritage learners take language classes, and online learning – receiving a huge boost during the Covid-19 crisis – has facilitated new connections between learner communities abroad and communities in Africa and blurred boundaries between different language learning settings. The role of African languages in language learning contexts, and teaching African languages as second or other languages has attracted increasing scholarly attention, often in

relation to the teaching of Swahili or South African languages (e.g. Wildsmith-Cromarty & Conduah, 2014; Malangwa, 2017; Malangwa, 2018; Naidoo et al., 2018; Murray, 2019; Osore, 2020).

In the following sections, I explore different moments of learning of African languages to show the importance of language learning for engagement with the continent, and more specifically how learners of African languages can interact with, appreciate, and support language developments in Africa.

3.1 Language learning

Language learning has been shown to have a number of positive effects and advantages for the learner, and is undertaken from a variety of positive motivations (e.g. Dörnyei, 2001; Dörnyei & Ushioda, 2011). Motivation for language learning includes cognitive and communicative reasons, e.g. that knowledge of more than one language increases interpersonal and intercultural competence and provides tools for better understanding and interaction with different global societies. Another set of motivations for language learning are related to cultural identity and social cohesion. Languages serve as an important vehicle of cultural identity and embody cultural wisdom, and learning a language provides a good means for learning about this cultural knowledge. Through language learning, we also acknowledge and promote multilingual realities, which increase social cohesion and public well-being.

Against this background, learning African languages acquires a particular important significance. The motivations and benefits of language learning apply to the learning of African languages as well, but in addition, learning an African language at the present time contributes to amplifying their voice and weight. It links to the decolonising agenda which has become more visible and more important over the last years. It allows language learners to participate in the African language renaissance, from an outside perspective or "from the margins" as it were. It acknowledges the importance of African languages and provides access points for a better understanding of African cultures and discourses.

By focussing on two specific case studies of learning experiences of African languages, I show in the following sections how this wider agenda relates to specific instances of learning.

3.2　Otjiherero

The first example relates to my own language learning experience of learning Otjiherero (or Herero), a Bantu language spoken by about 150,000 speakers in Namibia and Botswana.

As part of my research collaboration with Jekura Kavari, now at the University of Namibia, I started learning Otjiherero when we first met in the late 1990s in the UK. Among the vocabulary I learned were numbers: *íímwe* 'one', *ímbárì* 'two', *índátú* 'three', and then higher numbers – tens, twenties, hundreds, thousands and then *éyòví rímwè nòmás̱éré mùvyú nà íné* – "1,904" (literally, "thousand one and hundreds nine and four"). It seemed a curious example of a numeral, and I was surprised why of all the possible numbers I was taught 1,904.

As it turned out it was not so much 'one thousand nine hundred and four', but 'nineteen hundred and four' – 1904 – the number of the year inscribed in Herero cultural memory. This was the year of the Battle of the Waterberg, when on 11th August German colonial troops began a violent campaign against Herero men, women and children; it was the beginning of, in the words of the historians David Olusoga and Casper Erichson (2010), the "Kaiser's Holocaust". The significance of the event for Herero cultural and political history is reflected in the semantic map of numbers in the Otjiherero language. 1904 – éyòví rímwè nòmáséré mùvyú nà íné – compares to 1066 or 9/11 in English; numbers which refer to dates, dates which changed the history of the people.

Words like this are entry points to different semantic networks. Finding mismatches between the languages we know and the new language we learn opens up spaces for reflection and enquiry. It doesn't have to be this way – there are other ways to conceptualize and observe the world. It is an experience which makes us more culturally intelligent and humbler in our cultural assumptions.

Each language contains its own semantic and epistemic system – different ways of seeing and analysing the world around us, different categories and expressions to come to terms with our human experience, and different histories and cultural memories. The example shows how even something ostensibly universal like numbers can have deep cultural significance. Learning a different language helps us to understand these systems, different from the ones we are used to. Through this we are better equipped to understand our shared experience, but also ourselves.

In our own work, we included the number, with a short explanation of its historical significance, in the grammatical sketch we published in 2002 (Möhlig et al., 2002: 53), and so made this "entry point" available to future learners and those interested in Otjiherero.

3.3 isiZulu

The second example is based on a long-term study undertaken from 2006 to 2011 with learners of isiZulu at SOAS, University of London. The full results of the study are reported in Marten and Mostert (2012), but here I want to focus specifically on questions of motivation.

IsiZulu is the largest South African language in terms of numbers of speakers, with an about 12 million home language speakers and an additional 16 million second language speakers (Eberhard et al., 2021), and one of South Africa's official languages.

The study involved 28 participants studying Beginner's Zulu (Zulu 1), a full-year, accredited module with 4 contact hours per week. The aims of the study were to explore the linguistic background of the learners, their motivation for learning isiZulu, and their self-assessed progress after one term of learning isiZulu. The data were collected via a questionnaire consisting of 21 questions, which was distributed among students about 10 weeks after learning isiZulu. The questions related to students' linguistic backgrounds, attitudes and motivation, as well as to their learning experience in terms of different skills

covered, learning materials and overall progress made. The findings of the study included that learners had diverse linguistic biographies, often with a very high number of languages in their repertoire, resulting in a highly multilingual classroom. There was also a corelation between language background and motivation, and between language background and attainment.

With respect to motivation, the study asked whether students had a specific motivation for studying isiZulu, whether they used isiZulu outside the classroom, whether they expected to use isiZulu after completing the course, and whether they specifically expected to use isiZulu professionally. Responses to these questions were categorised into five headings: Academic motivation, personal or family background, general interest in Southern Africa, interest in South African languages, and telic motivation, i.e. related to particular professional or personal aims or goals. The results of the study showed that all these reasons were relevant to the learners in the studied group, and were largely equally popular. In addition, several students did not have a specific reason for studying isiZulu.

An interesting correlation appeared between the number of languages students had studied before, and their motivation for studying isiZulu. Students with several background languages, and especially those who had studied an African language before (which was typically Swahili), were often studying isiZulu for academic reasons, or for no specific reason. On the other hand, students for whom isiZulu was the first African language they were studying, had more diverse motivations, and the most popular reason was personal background.

More detailed examination of the responses shows that cultural, social and professional reasons all played a role for studying isiZulu. While not all students used isiZulu outside of the course context and the classroom, those who did use South African music in particular to practice and develop their language skills and to learn more about the cultural context in which the language is used. For a number of students, understanding of the wider South African political and historical context was also important. The following two comments, in response

to questions about reasons for studying isiZulu and about the wider importance of isiZulu, illustrate the link between language learning, culture, and wider interests in Southern Africa:

"I have a strong interest in SA politics and history and the music of southern Africa."

"Zulu, as with many other languages, should be promoted and taught more widely. … One can learn so much about a culture in the depths of the language alone, and Zulu aids understanding of South African issues, so must continue to be taught both inside and out of South Africa."

For many students, learning isiZulu was also important for their future plans. This included travelling in South Africa, and in many instances also the use of isiZulu for professional reasons, for example to conduct research or fieldwork. A number of students also noted the usefulness of isiZulu for potential future work. The following two responses illustrate this point:

"I hope to get a work placement in Southern Africa and am positive that I will use my Zulu or transfer the language skills I have gained to another Bantu language spoken in the respective area of employment."

"If I work in SA, I think it will help me to gain access to local people and might facilitate the work."

The examples show how language learning relates to different motivations and that learners have a range of different reasons for learning isiZulu. However, what these reasons have in common is that they embody a positive attitude to the

language, and view it is an important tool not only for the better understanding of Zulu culture, but also for the attainment of personal and professional aims. For learners of isiZulu the language is 'marketable' as it is for isiZulu speakers in South Africa (Pilay & Zungu, 2014). Learners of isiZulu can be seen as using language as an access point to engage with the community of speakers, and in many instances as a step towards becoming part of this community.

4 Conclusions

Languages are a key part of being human, and they are intimately linked to human culture, history, and identity. Learning languages builds bridges between communities, increases cultural understanding, and broadens perspectives. In the context of African languages, learning a language like Otjiherero or isiZulu provides entry points in the cultures, histories and societies associated with the languages. It allows learners to better understand historical and contemporary dynamics, and to become more aware of culturally and socially important discourses and how they are encoded and expressed in the language.

In the present time, African language dynamics and ecologies are changing, and the role, recognition and functions of African languages are increasing, even though their function is often not secured or supported by robust policies, and many African languages remain under-represented, under-described and often endangered. The increased awareness of African languages and their importance is linked to a wider cultural and political discourse about African thought and decolonising knowledge. Learning an African language provides the means to understand this discourse better, and allows learners to make a contribution as well, by amplifying the voice of African languages in the sphere of language learning and teaching, and by participating in the increased value African languages are beginning to enjoy, and hopefully continue to enjoy in the future.

The starting point for language learners is often as an outsider, but they can use their language skills as entry points to the culture, and become more engaged in the life of the language community, and make a contribution from

the margins, to help the emerging African language renaissance to continue and prosper.

Acknowledgments

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