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Is the Linguistic Situation in Africa Relatively Stable?

ABSTRACT

The article explores the complex linguistic landscape of several African nations, focusing on the coexistence of indigenous languages and European languages in official contexts. Despite the rich linguistic diversity in Africa, where approximately 2,000 languages are spoken, only a few have official status, often alongside European languages. The study analyzes five regions: Seychelles, Comoros, Madagascar, Central African Republic and South Africa, with an additional mention of Tanzania. Each region's language policies, the role of indigenous languages in education and governance, and the socio-economic factors influencing language use are examined. The findings reveal a trend of diminishing use of indigenous languages in favor of European languages, driven by socio-economic factors and historical contexts.

Keywords: *language diversity, indigenous languages, official languages, socio-economic factors, language policy, multilingual education, Africa*

Introduction

The language diversity in Africa is quite impressive: from around 7,000 languages currently in use about 2 thousand is located in Africa (Nigeria alone has approximately 500 languages), and “[o]n the whole, language death appears to be less dramatic on the African continent than in other parts of the world” (Dimmendaal & Voelz, 2007, 598). This is all the more surprising because, partially due to historical reasons, only a few dozen of the indigenous African languages have official status, quite often besides “more developed” European ones, and in many countries, only European languages are in official use (Albaugh, 2014; Heugh, 2018; Odugu & Lemieux, 2019; Ogbonnaya & Els, 2024; Sibanda, 2019; Stoop, 2017).

How is it possible that the African continent keeps so many “living” languages? For example, the population of Europe is about two times smaller but the number of languages is (only) approximately 250, even despite many “language-protecting” measures. Obviously, many factors influence the language preferences of a community, but the goal of this article is to take a closer look into some African regions to analyze the highest and most visible spheres of language distribution (which languages are used in governments, job markets, linguistic landscape, general education) and try to foresee how the situation can change.

Research Methodology

In the process of forming the sample for the study, I decided to limit myself to countries that meet the following criteria: a) more than one language has official status (no doubt, real usage is more important than statuses but, in many cases, wide usage of unofficial language is complicated), and these statuses have been established for at least ten years (otherwise, changes might not have fully influenced the situation, as, for instance, in Ethiopia); b) at least one of the official languages is “endemic” (to reduce external factors influencing its “popularity”); c) the corresponding “endemic” languages are not part of dialect continua, as otherwise, the difficulties in identifying the used language increase. It was also decided to leave sign languages out of the current study, as the spheres of their distribution are often somewhat more special.

After applying the above criteria, the sample included five regions:

1. Seychelles with “endemic” Seychellois Creole (French-based), alongside with English and French;
2. Comoros with “endemic” Comorian (Bantu family), alongside with French and Arabic;
3. Madagascar with “endemic” Malagasy (Austronesian family), alongside with French;
4. Central African Republic with “endemic” Sango (a creole language based on Niger-Congo Ngbandi), alongside with French;
5. South Africa with “endemic” Afrikaans (Indo-European family), alongside English as well as Venda, Zulu, Xhosa, Southern Ndebele, Swati, Northern Sotho, Sotho, Tswana, Tsonga (all of them are parts of dialect continua).

Moreover, although Tanzania was not included in the sample (Swahili also has official status in Kenya, Uganda and Rwanda, but it is Tanzania that gives the greatest support to it), the language situation there is quite non-trivial and instructive, so I decided to analyze it as well.

My research questions are:

RQ1: What are the factors contributing to the preservation of indigenous languages in Africa despite the dominance of European languages?

RQ2: How do language policies in different African nations impact the use of indigenous languages in education and governance?

RQ3: What role do socio-economic factors play in the language choices of communities in the selected regions?

RQ4: How does the historical context of colonization influence current language dynamics in

these regions?

The study reviews existing literature on language diversity in Africa, examining historical contexts, language policies, and socio-economic factors influencing language use in the selected regions. The research focuses on specific regions (Seychelles, Comoros, Madagascar, Central African Republic, South Africa, and Tanzania) to provide in-depth analysis of language dynamics in these areas. Each case study explores the official status of languages, their use in education and governance, and the socio-economic implications. The article references census data and surveys to provide quantitative insights into language proficiency and usage among the populations in the selected regions. This data helps illustrate trends in language use over time. Moreover, the study examines the language policies in each region, including Constitutions and legal codes, to understand how these policies influence the practical use of languages in various spheres such as education, government and the labor market. By comparing the language situations across different regions, the research identifies common patterns and unique circumstances that influence language dynamics in each context. Overall, these methods combine qualitative and quantitative data to build a comprehensive understanding of the language landscape in the selected African regions.

Research Results

Seychelles (officially – the Republic of Seychelles)

France established the first permanent settlements on Seychelles in the 18th century and thereafter started to import slaves to these islands from Madagascar and East Africa. In 1794, the archipelago came under the control of the British Empire, which encouraged Indian immigration. In 1976, the Seychelles gained independence.

Population ~ 120 thousand people (2024), territory ~ 457 square kilometers, GDP per capita ~ 21 thousand dollars (2023).

The current (1993) Constitution states that the national languages are Seychellois, English and French, and that citizens can use any of them for any purpose. In addition, English is defined as the sole language of legal proceedings and law writing, except in specially stipulated cases.

The language of official documents is English, with the following exceptions: the Catholic Church issues baptismal and confirmation certificates in French, passports and immigration cards use not only English but also Seychellois, the public service Code of Ethics and the national cultural policy of the Ministry of Youth, Sport and Culture are written in both Seychellois and English (Zelime, 2022).

The only ministry in which Seychellois is commonly used as a working language in its written

form is the Ministry of Local Government and Community Affairs, but others (such as the Ministry of Health, Agriculture and the Environment) sometimes use it alongside English for public information. Oral official communication is dominated by English (in most ministries), Seychellois is used alongside English at lower levels of the administrative hierarchy, and Seychellois is also the primary spoken language in the National Assembly (Zelime, 2022).

Despite the widespread use of Seychellois in everyday life, knowledge of it is not mandatory for civil servants, which is why, for example, nurses often have to act as translators between patients and visiting doctors (Zelime, 2022).

In 1981, Seychellois became the language of instruction in the first four grades, but in 1996 the transition to English began already in the third year of study (Ivanov et al., 2015), and this was largely based on the opinions of teachers (Deutschmann & Zelime, 2022). The National Curriculum Framework allows the use of Seychellois and French in addition to English as “support languages” (Zelime, 2022).

Even though Seychellois is the most familiar language for the vast majority of students, not a single primary school teacher surveyed supported the idea of using it as the language of instruction in grades three and higher, and 96.5% supported introducing English even earlier (including in kindergartens), based on the greater market value of this language (Zelime & Deutschmann, 2018). Mathematics is already taught in English from grade one (Deutschmann & Zelime, 2022).

Difficulties also arise with the use of Seychellois as a “support language”: 80% of inspection reports contain references to the frequent mixing of languages during the teaching process, and as a result, the Ministry of Education has ordered stricter adherence to the language policy envisaged in the curricula (Ministry of Education, 2014).

According to the census data, in 2002, 91.8% of residents aged three years and over spoke Seychellois at home, 4.9% spoke English, 0.8% spoke French, and 2.5% spoke another language; in 2010, the figures were 90.4%, 5.1%, 0.7%, and 3.8%; in 2022, the figures were 85.1%, 8.0%, 0.5%, and 6.4%. The trends are clear.

Comoros (officially – the Union of the Comoros)

France established control over these islands in the 19th century. In 1975, the Comorian State gained independence, but the island of Mayotte remains an overseas department of France.

Population ~ 1 million people (2024), territory ~ 2 thousand square kilometers, GDP per capita ~ 1.5 thousand dollars (2023).

The 1985 Constitution defined French and Arabic as the official languages. The 2001

Constitution established Comorian as the official and national language, French and Arabic as official languages, and, among other things, prescribed the obligation of candidates for deputies to be able to read, write and speak Comorian and French or Arabic.

Later laws defined language requirements for government officials in more detail: candidates for the Assembly of the Union of the Comoros (the country's legislative body) must read and write in Comorian, French or Arabic perfectly; candidates for the positions of island councilors, mayors and deputy mayors must read and write in at least two of the three official languages; village heads and district heads must read and write in the national language or one of the official languages. In practice, administrative business is conducted in French and, to a lesser extent, Arabic, although Comorian is also used in oral communication (Ahmed-Chamanga, 2022).

The 2001 Comoros Civil Code prescribes the use of French or Comorian in courts.

The 1984 Comoros Labor Code also contains several language requirements: internal regulations concerning safety and hygiene measures must be written in Comorian, in an official language or in one of the two; collective agreements must be drawn up in one of the official languages; contracts with trainees must be drawn up in one of the official languages and, if possible, in the language of the trainee (the latter requirement is duplicated in the 1988 Act on Trainees).

Of more specific remarks, for example, the Code of Marketing and Distribution of Breast-milk Substitutes allows inscriptions in at least one of the official languages or English, and the National Regulation Authority of Information and Communications Technology only accepts declarations in French. French and Arabic are used on Comorian banknotes and passports. Arabic is widely used in religious contexts (more than 95% of Comorians are Muslims), but its real knowledge is restricted to specialists (Full, 2006).

The wider use of Comorian was further complicated by the controversy over a unified Latin orthography, which was generally agreed on only in 2008; before that, Comorian was mostly written – if at all – in Arabic script (Ahmed-Chamanga, 2022). Note also that Comorian is the language of the national anthem.

According to the Education Law of 1994, the language of instruction in primary, secondary, high school and university is French or Arabic (i.e., instruction in Comorian is permitted only in kindergartens). In practice, French continues to be the preferred language for teaching, while Arabic is used mainly in religious education (Ahmed-Chamanga, 2022). The launch of Comorian-language and bilingual (Comorian-French) curricula was planned for 2014, but due to political upheavals, all such initiatives have remained at the experimental level, as of 2020 (Ahmed-Chamanga, 2022).

According to the 2003 census, among the population aged 15 and over, “almost everyone” spoke

Comorian, 32.1% spoke French, and 7.1% spoke Arabic. Of the same respondents, 41.7% were literate, with 35.3% naming Comorian in Latin as their main written language, 30.6% French, 24.0% Comorian in Arabic, 7.2% Arabic, and 2.9% another.

According to the 2017 census, of the 758,316 residents, 677,246 (89.3%) spoke Comorian, 254,813 (33.6%) spoke French, and 50,117 (6.6%) spoke Arabic. Among the population aged 12 and over, 55.7% were literate, with 51.7% able to read and write French, 49.6% Comorian in Arabic, 35.2% Comorian in Latin, and 16.5% Arabic.

The more recent census did not set any age limits for the number of speakers (and therefore included infants and those who, due to their age, had not yet fully faced the educational system), but it is possible to estimate that the share of those who speak French has increased somewhat, while the share of those speaking Comorian and Arabic has decreased. Regarding the literacy rate, it can be noted that Comorian in Latin remained at the same level, while the other variants have grown approximately twofold, which is probably mainly due to the educational situation.

Nevertheless, the position of the Comorian language remains relatively stable, which supposedly can be explained by the socio-economic factors: according to World Bank data for 2013, primary schools in Comoros were attended only by 81.4% of children of the corresponding age, and as for secondary schools, this figure amounted to 47.3%. It is also indicative that as of 2017, only 55.7% of residents aged 12 and older were literate.

Madagascar (officially – the Republic of Madagascar)

In the 19th century, Madagascar came under French control. It became independent in 1960.

Population ~ 32 million (2024), territory ~ 593 thousand square kilometers, GDP per capita ~ 529 dollars (2023).

The 1958 Constitution named Malagasy and French as official languages. The 1992 Constitution does not mention official languages but defines Malagasy as the national language. The 2007 Constitution established Malagasy, French, and English as official languages. The current (2010) Constitution recognizes Malagasy as the national language, and Malagasy and French as official ones.

In practice, French dominates the official sphere and the labor market: almost every job advertisement requires a good command of written and spoken French (Dahl, 2011).

After independence, French remained the language of instruction until 1972, when primary and secondary education was transferred to Malagasy, but in 1992 there was a return to French. Since 2008, a system has been implemented according to which the first five grades are taught in Malagasy, the sixth and seventh grades are taught in Malagasy and French, and then the so-called scientific subjects

(mathematics, sciences of life and soil, technology) are taught in French, and the other subjects (geography and history) in Malagasy (Dahl, 2011).

At the same time, those who can afford it enroll their children in kindergartens and so-called *écoles d'expression française* as early as possible to benefit from immersion in French (Dahl, 2011).

According to the 1993 census, of the 8,299,743 inhabitants aged ten years and older, 3,813,367 (45.9%) were literate; 2,401,439 (29.0%) were literate in Malagasy only, 1,348,304 (16.2%) were literate in Malagasy and another language, and 63,624 (0.8%) were literate in another language only. Thus, in 1993, 45.2% of the population aged ten years and older could read and write Malagasy, and for French this figure was no more than 17.0% (since “other language” may not always mean French).

According to the 2018 census, among the inhabitants aged three years and older, 99.9% speak Malagasy and 23.6% speak French; among residents aged eleven years and older, 77.0% are literate in Malagasy and 36.8% in French. While French is obviously on the rise, the positions of Malagasy are quite safe, but Madagascar's economic situation is even worse than in Comoros, which can be one of the major factors preventing language shift.

Central African Republic

The future Central African Republic came under French control at the turn of the 19th and 20th centuries. It gained independence in 1960.

Population ~ 5.5 million (2024), territory ~ 623 thousand square kilometers, GDP per capita ~ 539 dollars (2023).

In 1963, French became the official language, Sango – the national language, in 1991 Sango also received the official language status. The share of French in administrative services is about 80%, knowledge of written French is a prerequisite for career advancement (Beyom et al., 2014).

Legislative attempts to make Sango the language of school education have been ongoing since 1997, but except for some experimental programs, as of 2021 this area uses only French (Couralet, 2022).

It is difficult to find reliable statistics on language proficiency in the Central African Republic, but according to the survey led by Robert Beyom, 93% of residents speak Sango, 21% speak French, and 7% speak neither Sango nor French (Beyom et al., 2014); with the caveat that, given the presence of French in various spheres, many people have at least a basic knowledge of it (Steien et al., 2016).

However, the low presence of French outside the educational system and the high unemployment rate reduces the motivation to learn it (Beyom et al., 2014). According to the 2019 Multiple Indicator Cluster Survey, just over 40% of young people aged 20 to 24 had completed primary education and

only one in six had completed lower secondary education, while according to the 2018–2019 Early Grade Reading Assessment carried out in the Bangui School Inspectorate (the least disadvantaged one), 57% of grade 2 students, 41% of grade 3 students, and 20% in grade 4 students could not read a single familiar word in one minute (Couralet, 2022).

It is also worth noting that in recent decades, the country has been experiencing regular military actions. In such a context, many people probably do not encounter official language policies very often, and this situation is not very conducive to changing the language of communication.

South Africa (officially – the Republic of South Africa)

The first Dutch colonists began arriving in the territory of the future South African Republic in the 17th century. In 1795, these lands came under British control; at the turn of the 19th and 20th centuries, the desire of the Netherlands to maintain its influence led to the Anglo-Boer Wars. In 1961, the South African Republic gained independence.

Population ~ 62 million people (2022), territory ~ 1.2 million square kilometers, GDP per capita ~ 6 thousand dollars (2024).

After independence, English and Afrikaans were used as official languages. The 1996 Constitution added nine indigenous languages (Venda, Zulu, Xhosa, Southern Ndebele, Swati, Northern Sotho, Sesotho, Tswana, Tsonga) and gave government officials the option to use any of the final eleven in their work. In 2012, the Use of Official Languages Act was passed, which obliges government agencies and public organizations to use at least two official languages in their work.

Currently, the government documents and the linguistic landscape use different languages (depending on the language preferences in a particular region), and the Parliament and all nine provincial legislatures regularly use interpretation services (Hlengwa-Selepe, 2024). However, English remains dominant in most areas, and in the absence of clear regulatory guidelines and accountability for non-compliance, other languages are often neglected (Hlengwa-Selepe, 2024).

According to the National Income Dynamics Study, among men (of African descent) with employment in 2008, those who reported being able to read and write very well in English earned over 50 percent more, on average, than other men with similar characteristics but who provided lower self-reports of English language ability (Posel et al., 2022). Moreover, while it is not impossible to be wealthy in South Africa without knowledge of the English language, it is safe to say that this constitutes an exception (Rudwick, 2022).

Even though, according to the website of the National Department of Basic Education, starting from the fourth grade, English dominates as the language of education (in 2007, 79.1% of fourth-

graders studied in English, with Afrikaans in second place at 12.3%), in primary school the dynamics for the “endemics” are generally favorable: in 2007, only 21.8% of first-graders, 23.8% of second-graders and 27.7% of third-graders studied in English (in 1998 – 31.7%, 35.3% and 40.9%, respectively), while for Afrikaans these same figures looked like 9.5%, 9.6% and 9.9% (in 1998 – 5.1%, 5.7% and 6.7%). Code-switching in classes is also quite common (Taylor et al., 2014).

However, many parents insist that English be used as the language of teaching (Coetzee-Van Rooy, 2022; Guzula, 2022), and if it’s possible (financially), try to send their children to English-language schools (De Klerk, 2002; Bangeni & Kapp 2007; Hunter, 2019; du Plessis & du Plessis, 2023; Hlengwa-Selepe, 2024), even despite numerous reports of teachers’ inadequate English skills (du Plessis & du Plessis, 2023).

According to the censuses, in 1996, English was the language of home communication for 8.7% of respondents, in 2001 for 8.3%, in 2011 for 9.7%, in 2022 for 8.7%; Afrikaans – for 14.5%, 13.4%, 13.5% and 10.6%, respectively. Based on the situation described above, the decrease in the number of Afrikaans speakers is quite expected, but how is it possible to explain the “stability” of English, especially given the numerous mentions of the population’s rejection of indigenous languages, in particular (Diko, 2023; Seethal, 2023; Hlengwa-Selepe, 2024).

One of the factors is changes in the racial composition of the population: for example, in 1996, 11.0% of South Africa’s population was white, while in 2022 only 7.3%. Secondly, according to the Progress in International Reading Literacy Study, 78% of South African fourth graders have significant reading difficulties in any language (Thuketana & Makgabo, 2022), and according to the 2022 census, 49.4% of respondents aged 20 and above had not completed secondary school.

Finally, according to the General Household Surveys, in 2017 and 2018, over 80% of South Africans most often spoke the same language outside the home as they did at home, meaning the population remains largely segregated (at least linguistically), and although overall English proficiency is increasing, for the time being, it is not sufficient for the mass ‘anglicization’ of families (Posel et al., 2022).

Tanzania (officially – the United Republic of Tanzania)

In 1919, the future Tanzania came under British control. Tanganyika (the mainland of today’s Tanzania) gained independence in 1961, Zanzibar – in 1963, and in 1964 they formed the United Republic of Tanzania.

Population ~ 67 million people (2024), territory ~ 947 thousand square kilometers, GDP per capita ~ 1 thousand dollars (2024).

In the 1962 Constitution, Swahili was named the national language, and Swahili and English named the official languages. In practice, Swahili dominates in the social and political spheres and is the main language in the labor market (Telli, 2014; Wan, 2021); most employment opportunities for English speakers are provided in the private sector and in dealing with foreigners (Mapunda, 2022).

Some more specific examples: during election campaigns, the use of Swahili is prescribed (if necessary, it's also possible to use an interpreter) (Tanzania, 2010); in parliament, Swahili is used as a spoken language, English is used for writing laws; in the courts, especially in the higher courts, English is the working language (Dzahene-Quarshie, 2011). However, according to the data of recent years, Swahili has become dominant in the courts at all levels (Maganda, 2024).

Swahili is the language of two preparatory classes and seven grades of primary school; from secondary school onwards, the language of instruction is English (The United, 1995). These regulations are quite strict (the use of Swahili can be punished in secondary schools in the same way as the use of local languages in primary schools), but the mixing of languages (especially Swahili and English) during the educational process for better understanding of the material is also quite common (Mpemba, 2007; Muzale & Rugemalira, 2008; Tibategeza, 2010; Swai, 2023).

Despite numerous discussions about advantages of using Swahili at all levels of education (one of the reasons being poor knowledge of English by students and teachers (Tibategeza & du Plessis 2021, 159–160)), many researchers (Ulmer et al., 2023; Swai, 2023; Foster, 2023; Maganda, 2024 among others) note that teachers as well as parents and students support retention of English as the language of instruction for socio-economic reasons.

In terms of language proficiency, the following estimates were found: for 10% of Tanzanians, Swahili is their first language, for 90%, it is their second language (Webb & Kembo-Sure, 2000); more than 90% of Tanzanians speak Swahili (Marah-Hanak, 2011); approximately 90% of Tanzanians speak Swahili, less than 15% speak English (Petzell, 2012); Swahili is spoken by 90% to 99% of Tanzanians, while English is spoken by about 5% (Ulmer et al., 2023); of the 47 million Tanzanians who speak Swahili, for 15 million it is their first language, for 32 million it is their second language, and 6 million Tanzanians speak English as a second language (USAID, 2020).

It is also worth mentioning that the increase in the number of speakers of Swahili and, to a much lesser extent, English occurs at the expense of speakers of many (up to 150 (Tibategeza & du Plessis, 2021)) other local languages (Simango, 2006; Brenzinger, 2007), especially in the cities (Marten, 2006; Tibategeza & du Plessis, 2021). In addition to the above factors, these languages are also under pressure in other areas: for example, the Tanzania Communications Regulatory Authority only allows broadcasting in Swahili and English, except in specially permitted cases (Tanzania Communications

Regulatory Authority, 2005); it is extremely difficult to obtain permission to publish newspapers in other local languages (Muzale & Rugemalira, 2008); they are not represented in the linguistic landscape of the country (Mdukula, 2021, 80) and not used even to write the minutes of village meetings although people at such meetings generally use their home languages (Tibategeza & du Plessis, 2021).

Nevertheless, it is important not to lose sight of the fact that at the moment Tanzania remains a relatively backward country, as evidenced at least by the fact that only 20% of primary school graduates continue their education in secondary school (Maganda, 2024). If social well-being increases, access to English may also increase, with all the attendant consequences.

Conclusions

The study highlights the intricate relationship between language, culture, and socio-economic circumstances in Africa. While indigenous languages remain integral to local identity, their usage is increasingly threatened by the dominance of European languages in official domains. The analysis underscores the need for more effective language policies that promote and protect indigenous languages in education and governance to foster cultural diversity and social cohesion in the face of globalization and economic pressures.

The results of the study show that Africa is not a strange exception to the global trends of declining linguistic diversity, but an important factor contributing to the relative functional preservation of African languages is the difficult socio-economic situation in many regions. Still, while positions of some official languages remain relatively stable, in other cases, dynamics can be much worse. Moreover, although the current level of the economy and the pace of development in many African countries remain low, some progress is nevertheless present, and even if this does not pose a direct threat to most languages at the moment, without protective measures in language policy, the situation is going to become less favorable.

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