



LANGUAGE AND EDUCATION IN THE CONTEXT OF DECOLONIZATION

***Ilongo Fritz Ngale,**
University of Eswatini

Tarisayi Chimuka
National University of Lesotho

Mahlatsi Monaheng
National University of Lesotho

ABSTRACT

Given the problems associated with colonialism, globalization and the need for decolonization, the issue of language has never been more topical. Are independent African states justified in continuing to use the languages of the colonizers in national processes such as government proceedings and instruction in classrooms? In most cases indigenous communities struggle to gain mastery and proficiency of these foreign languages. A lot of time, effort and energy is lost in the process, yet they have their local languages ready for use! How can indigenous Africa languages be promoted in education and general human capital development? The methodology is basic research, while the theoretical framework is critical theoretical analysis through the lens of the interference theory, notably through proactive and retroactive interference. In other words, using either indigenous or European languages as medium of instruction in our contemporary educational systems is fraught with challenges associated with acculturation. From a psychological perspective, retroactive interference implies the interference of older memories (informal learning experiences acquired through traditional education systems) with the retrieval of newer memories (learning in formal and non-formal European settings). Secondly, proactive interference is interference of newer memories (those from modern European educational systems) with the retrieval of older memories (African traditional worldview for example). Consequences of the aforementioned include; learners master neither

traditional African nor European worldviews, and there is mediocrity of graduates in terms of content mastery, skills and competency development. The paper suggests a way forward; offering indigenous languages institutional status in governance, law, and instruction in education.

KEYWORDS: Colonialism, globalization, decolonization, acculturation, proactive interference

***CORRESPONDING AUTHOR:** Ilongo Fritz Ngale, University of Eswatini. E-mail address:
nfilongo@uniswa.sz Tel.: (+268) 76335629

INTRODUCTION

Given the problems associated with colonialism, globalization and the need for decolonization, the issue of language has never been more urgent in Africa. The various colonial powers had insisted on their own languages as the official media of communication. Yet indigenous African languages are very important. The challenge for African countries is how to promote their nationalistic aspirations of building societies united by a common language and culture on the one hand, and meeting the globalizing demands of a common language for all. Are independent African states justified in continuing to use the languages of the colonizers in national processes such as government proceedings and instruction in classrooms? Are they also justified in insisting on their indigenous languages as medium of instruction? These are serious predicaments whose solutions need careful and thought consideration.

REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE

African traditional education system and language before colonization

Two questions are salient as far as the African education system and language before colonization are concerned. Firstly, was there any education system in Africa before colonization? Secondly, was there any foreign language used as medium of instruction before colonization? To answer these questions, Mosweunyane (2013, pp. 51 - 53) argues that education had been always existing in Africa even before colonization. He further argues that knowledge was passed from elders to children through the use of proverbs and myths which were repeatedly told. This implies that the learning process was verbally active through the mother tongue (MT).

According to Mahlatsi (2017, p.96), this form of education was both instructional and practical. Education was instructional because children were prohibited from doubting or questioning anything that was taught. For example, children were taught not to eat eggs when they became adolescents, while the question of why they should not do so was not entertained by elders. The philosophy behind this teaching was to prevent adolescents from being sexually active before marriage. As such, marriage was normally arranged by parents



at adulthood stage. What is of great importance in this form of education is that knowledge was passed from elders to children through their mother tongue.

Education was practical because children were taught various skills such as farming, art and domestic work through watching and doing. In the whole process of teaching and learning, children used their mother tongue. Given that they were taught in their mother tongue; it was very easy for elders to pass on knowledge to children. It was not only easy on the part of elders to impart knowledge to children but, it was also easy for children to understand properly what was taught. In other words, children received knowledge imparted to them without any language barrier. Furthermore, education could be accessed and afforded by many children without discrimination when it was done in mother tongue. Bamidele in Badru (2015, p.106) argues that:

When the MT is used as a medium of instruction, the person being educated can fully take in, digest and assimilate properly the content knowledge being imparted. The recipient would then develop clarity of mind, originality of thought and perceptive analysis in respect of such content of knowledge.

Learning in Africa before colonization was also done through the use of songs, legends, riddles as well as stories (Mosweunyane, 2013, p.51). All these were done in mother tongues through which learners acquired indigenous knowledge, skills, cultural norms, and values, which formed part of the African identity. This answers the second question made above of whether or not, there were foreign languages used in Africa before colonization.

The right to language is commonly utilized for identification purposes as emphasized by the International Labor Organization and the African Commission on Human and People's Rights report 2009. It argues that: "With regards to language rights, the most common trend is the identification of an official language as well as the recognition of several national languages" (2009, p.74). In the light of the foregoing, it could be concluded that mother tongue and education were inseparable in Africa before colonization. As such, education was effective since it was conducted in mother tongue. Thus, "for education to be effective, the medium of instruction in schools should not be just any language but the mother tongue of the recipient (Badru, 2015, p.106). Having discussed African traditional education system and language before colonization, we shall consider colonization of language and education.

The colonization of language and education

Colonialists did not negotiate for the use of their foreign languages and education on arrival in Africa. Instead, foreign languages and education were imposed through conquest upon the African continent. Mosweunyane (2013, p.54) points out that the purpose of the conquest and imposition was to take control of Africa in order to civilize Africans through the Western education system. The Western education system was characterized by individualism and, as such, it succeeded to instill colonial values in the minds of many Africans and changed their ways of life.

In the light of the foregoing, it became a requirement for colonialists to first learn African languages as well as their cultural values so that they could effectively civilize Africans. For example, schools and churches were used in Lesotho to achieve this end. Put simply, schools and churches were used to foster change among Africans. Formal schools and churches were built by missionaries for providing Western education and religion, respectively. Those who received Western education and converts were encouraged to abandon their indigenous knowledge systems and cultural values. For example, polygamy, initiation schools and slaughtering of animals for ancestors were labeled as evil. At this juncture, it is important to note that colonialists used their foreign languages, education and religious values in African to teach Western values. Consequently, African languages, religion, and education systems were progressively colonized. We shall consider language and education during colonization.

Language and education during colonization

During colonization, colonial boarders ignored the African linguistic identity (Chebanne, 2014, p.243). Consequently, the African languages and education were replaced by Western languages and education. In conformity with this view, Mosweunyane (2013, p.55) argues that the Western education system imposed the use of English language in the former British colonies like Botswana. Given that the use of English language displaced African languages, they (African languages) were no longer recognized as important for learning. Furthermore, African learners who performed well were given scholarships to study at foreign universities such as Britain and America. The practice distanced learners away from their African languages and education systems. It did not only distance learners away from their African languages and education, but also reinforced the colonization of language and education.

Language and education in contemporary Africa

The rights to language and education are not adequately protected by national constitutions in contemporary Africa. It is only in rare cases that African constitutions provide opportunities for children to be taught in their mother tongue. Surprisingly, it is also in equally rare cases that curricula are tailored to address African cultural demands. As such, foreign languages continue to dominate African languages from home to tertiary schools. For example, some parents in Lesotho speak English language to their children. This is indicative that mother tongue is ignored and neglected by many African states and families. This situation is predominant even though some African children find it difficult to learn in foreign languages (International Labor Organization and the African Commission on Human and people's Rights report, 2009, p.84).

Among many other African countries, which have ignored and neglected the right to language and education is Lesotho. For example, the constitution of Lesotho recognizes both Sesotho and English languages as official languages. This is done despite the prevalence of other local languages found in Lesotho such as *Sephuthi, Xoza and Ndebele*, which are not recognized by the constitution. The most shocking aspect of this is that, in practical terms, English language dominates Sesotho language in the sense that, a student from high school must pass English language with credit or pass in order to be admitted to tertiary education.



On the one hand, many learners who want to study at local universities fail to do so because they do not meet this requirement. On the other hand, those who have managed to secure admission, struggle with their studies, some fail, while others dropout due to language barriers especially English and French, particularly at the National University of Lesotho. Now, the question is, what harm would be caused if learners are taught and study in their mother tongue? To address this concern, Sebotsa (2018, p.30) proposes: “an elaborate and well-researched language and translation policy built around key economic and socio-developmental areas such as agriculture, education, arts, trade and industry, commerce, communication, provision of techno-scientific services etc.”

English language does not dominate only at schools but also in the public service. For example, when an official speech is made by the King or Prime Minister of Lesotho, as well as ministers or government officials, the former is delivered in English language. Even the budget speech in Lesotho parliament; it is always delivered in English language. Most laws are also passed in English language. Now, questions arise; why should official speeches be delivered in English language when addressing a mixture of people who either mastered or does not understand English language? In other words, why should the majority of Sesotho speaking people be addressed in English? Why should the budget speech for Basotho people be delivered in English? Why should laws that are meant for Basotho be written in English? It goes without questioning that the right to indigenous language has been extremely ignored and neglected in African countries such as Lesotho. Therefore, immediate action has to be taken to decolonize language in Africa. To achieve this purpose, Article 18 of the Charter for African Cultural Renaissance 2006 provides that:

African States should prepare and implement reforms for the introduction of African languages into the education curriculum. To this end, each State should extend the use of African languages taking into consideration the requirements of social cohesion and technological progress, as well as regional and African integration.

Many African States have not yet taken necessary steps to domesticate this regional law. As a result, foreign languages and education continue to dominate in Africa. If Africa allows the status quo, more foreign languages will eventually come into Africa. Consequently, African languages, education, cultural values and traditional identity will gradually disappear.

METHODOLOGY

The methodology used in this paper is basic research, while the theoretical framework is critical theoretical analyses.



Basic research

Basic research, also called pure research or fundamental research, aims to improve understanding or prediction of natural or other phenomena (National Science Foundation, 2014). Basic research in this paper is conceptual, descriptive, and exploratory in the domain of language, education, and decolonization. The goal of using conceptual analysis as a method of inquiry into the present field of interest, is to improve understanding of the complexities, controversies, and dilemmas faced by African countries in attempting to navigate the issues of language, education, and decolonization.

Theoretical framework

The theoretical framework for this paper is based on a critique of the status of language and education within the specific context of decolonization. Critical Theory offers the paradigmatic structure for an assessment of, and in depth critique of the aforementioned issues under consideration.

Critical Theoretical Analyses

Critical Theory is a social theory oriented toward critiquing and changing society as a whole, in contrast to traditional theory oriented only to understanding or explaining it. Critical theory basically seeks to free humankind from imprisoning circumstances (Horkheimer, 1982). Critical theory involves a normative sociocultural dimension, either through criticizing society from some general theory of values, norms, or "oughts", or through criticizing it in terms of its own espoused values.

The core concepts of Critical Theory are as follows:

1. That critical social theory should be directed at the totality of society in its historical specificity (i.e. how it came to be configured at a specific point in time), and
2. That Critical theory should improve understanding of society by integrating all the major social sciences, including geography, economics, sociology, history, political science, anthropology, and psychology (Horkheimer, 1982).

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS

The future of African Languages in the context of globalization

Given the problems associated with colonialism, globalization and the need for decolonization, the issue of language has never been more topical. Are independent African states justified in continuing to use the languages of the colonizers in national processes such as government proceedings and instruction in



classrooms? In most cases the indigenous communities struggle to have proficiency in these foreign languages. A lot of time, effort and, energy is lost in the process, yet they have their local languages ready for use! How can indigenous Africa languages be promoted in education and general human capital development? This section examines the prospects of indigenous languages in Africa's future development.

Teaching, particularly of science subjects is very challenging if taught to learners in a second language (Selepeng 2001, p.19). This happens to many African learners in Southern Africa. A case in point is the recent outcry connected with the use of Afrikaans as a medium of instruction in South African Universities. The general belief is that for education to be truly liberating, there must be no colonizing agenda (Benson 2013, p.1). Writers have protested over the use of English and other European languages in literature largely as a result of colonialism. 'African Literature' came to mean African literature in English, French, German or Portuguese (Wa Thiongo n.d.)

Acculturation, language proficiency, retroactive and proactive inhibition

Acculturation

The African context through colonization, and now decolonization is the domain of inevitable acculturation. Acculturation is a transition in which an individual gradually accommodates and eventually takes on some of the values and beliefs of a new culture. Berry (1992) described acculturation as a process of "culture shedding and culture learning," that involves intentionally or unintentionally losing selected cultural values or behaviors with the passage of time, while adopting new values and behaviors from the new group. Generally, acculturation depends on how open the host culture is to interact, and also how willing the immigrant group is to adopt the norms and values of the host group (Berry, 2001).

Being acculturated may mean different things to different people and there have been many approaches to studying acculturation (Padilla, 1980). Roland (1990) sees the acculturation process as primarily entailing the adoption of one culture at the expense of another. In contrast, Berry, Trimble, and Olmedo (1986) define four models of acculturation. Berry (1970) described four different forms of acculturation based on the extent to which an individual has preference for his or her own culture and the extent to which he or she prefers the values and norms of the new culture. They are integration, assimilation, separation, and marginalization.

Integration

Integration is when the individual is willing to adopt behaviors and adapt to the colonizing culture, while also maintaining their own cultural norms and values – some form of a balance between the two.

Separation

In separation, the individual focuses almost exclusively on adopting the cultural norms of the colonizer and basically disregards their own cultural heritage. Assimilation is more or less the opposite of separation.



Assimilation

With assimilation, the person puts most of their efforts toward maintaining their own cultural heritage, and very little effort toward adopting the norms of the colonizing group.

Marginalization

Lastly, marginalization refers to an individual who neither adopts their own cultural heritage, nor that of the dominant group.

Berry (1997) argues that acculturation does not necessarily result in serious psychological challenges. In summarizing his views, he identified three levels at which acculturation could influence an individual's mental health.

- The first level involves letting go of behaviors that are not helpful in adapting to the new culture, while learning new behaviors and skills that are useful for the new culture. This level of acculturation involves mild to moderate conflict.
- The second level of acculturation involves moderate to significant conflict. This level of conflict occurs when the process of learning new skills and unlearning old skills becomes more of a challenge and results in acculturative stress.
- The final level is associated with severe conflict and psychological disorders. It represents a situation in which the changes involved in acculturation are overwhelming and beyond the individual's ability to cope.

For this paper, acculturation could influence language proficiency of the individual in relation to mastery of either traditional or Western languages, at the level of proactive and retroactive interference.

Interference theory

Interference theory is a theory regarding human memory. Interference occurs in learning; it is the notion that memories encoded in long-term memory (LTM) are forgotten, and cannot be retrieved into short-term memory (STM) effectively due to either memories interfering, or hampering, one another (Edwards, 2010). As there are an immense number of comparably encoded memories within the storage of LTM, the challenge for memory retrieval is recalling the specific information to be retrieved and worked upon in the temporary workspace provided in STM (Edwards, 2010). The retention of information with respect to the relevant time of encoding memories into LTM has an effect on the degree of interference strength (Edwards, 2010).

Separation, adoption, and proactive interference

Where the individual or group adopt the language of the new culture, by separating itself from its traditional language, it is very likely that there will occur the phenomenon of proactive interference. Proactive interference, also known as *proactive inhibition*, is the interference of newer memories with the retrieval of older memories (Edwards, 2010). In other words, subsequently learned memories directly contribute to the forgetting of previously learned memories. The effect of retroactive interference takes place when any type of skill has not been rehearsed over long periods of time (Edwards, 2010). Of the two effects of interference

theory, retroactive interference is considered the more common and more problematic type of interference compared to proactive interference (Edwards, 2010).

Assimilation, maintenance, and retroactive interference

On the other hand, when the individual or group resist the language of the new culture, by maintaining close ties with the traditional language, acculturation will most likely be accompanied by retroactive interference. Retroactive interference, also known as *retroactive inhibition*, is the interference of older memories with the retrieval of newer memories (Edwards, 2010). Of the two effects of interference theory, proactive interference is considered the less common and less problematic type of interference compared to retroactive interference (Edwards, 2010). It has been hypothesized that forgetting working memories would be non-existent if not for proactive interference (Keppel, et al., 1962).

WAY FORWARD

The Future of African Languages in the context of globalization

Ngugi wa Thiongo contends that imperialism in its various phases such as colonialism and neo-colonialism, was responsible for gagging African voices (Wa Thiongo, 1986). Hence, Ngugi advocates the need to liberate the continent's economy, politics and culture through language nationalism. This suggests the primacy of African languages in governance and education. In other words, every culture has a right to its own language as a form of its identity. To deny indigenous peoples the right to use their language is tantamount to a form of cultural genocide.

Language is an essential part of, and intrinsically linked to, indigenous peoples' ways of life, culture and identities. Languages embody many indigenous values and concepts and contain indigenous peoples' histories and development. They are fundamental markers of indigenous peoples' distinctiveness and cohesiveness as peoples (UNHRC-EMRIP, 2012).

The aforementioned view suggests that the language of a people is intricately tied to their sense of identity, their well-being and ease of transmission of ideas and values. If this view is taken seriously, then there is a sense in which African indigenous languages are indispensable in the process of nation building. Colonialism had wreaked havoc on the integrity and well-being of the colonial subjects. Subsequently, the continued use of foreign languages in instruction would point to perpetual domination of the colonized. However, left on their own, one may still inquire as to which of the indigenous languages should be used as a medium of instruction? A fight would still ensue among the various indigenous African languages, with each competing for recognition.

In the majority of cases, African governments are in a dilemma as to which language to use in educational instruction (Masuku, 2007, p.340). Furthermore, indigenous communities also struggle to gain proficiency of languages. African writers have generally protested against the use of English and other European languages in African literature largely as a result of colonialism. 'African Literature' came to mean African literature in



English, French, German or Portuguese (Wa Thiongo, n.d.). Ngugi was calling for African language rehabilitation. However, with ethnicity rearing her ugly head, would the various African communities support other indigenous languages over and above their own? Should all these languages be declared national and required to be used for educational instruction?

Kwesi Prah regards the question of language of educational instruction in Africa as a conundrum. African nations are forced to make a choice between the language of the colonialists on one hand and local languages on the other. The question is which one?

Africa proper (non-Arabic Africa) is the only area of the world where the overwhelming majorities (90 percent and often more), half a century after the departure of the colonial powers, continue to use the languages of their former colonial masters to increasing degrees as languages of instruction. This extended lease on life of the colonial languages is possible largely because those groups and social elements in charge of African societies, the elites, want to keep the colonial languages and want to use these languages as languages of instruction (Prah, p.2).

Some scholars have argued that, to continue using English and other colonial languages such as French or Portuguese is not only torture but also unfair to the learners (Prah, n.d.). Certainly, this is the work of African elites who want to keep ties with their erstwhile colonial masters!

A language, over and above its value as a means of communication, is an integral part of the individuality of a people, intimately connected with every aspect of its social life, and it derives from this source that 'emotional' quality which makes it resistant to influences from external sources. It was the emotional element which enabled some of the European languages to resist the influence of Latinization and to emerge subsequently in a national form, while others, though submitting to the Latin influence, nevertheless reproduced much of their own idiom and vocabulary in the form of language finally evolved (Prah, p.7).

On the other side of the trajectory, the roll out of globalization brings to question the efficacy of popularizing non-international languages. The specific question is whether it would be prudent to promote seSotho, seTswana, isiZulu, isiVenda or Shona in the face of rapidly expanding globalization. In a rapidly modernizing world, would the world not be better served by widely used European languages? The other profound question has been that, even if isiZulu or isiXhosa and other indigenous languages were made national languages in South Africa or any other specific languages elsewhere, would this make them international?

It is a pity that language is often associated with many other considerations such as development, poverty alleviation, cultural freedoms and so forth. However, few have thought through the problems of multi-lingualism in Africa. There are just too many nations in Africa! Nigeria for one has more than 400 languages. In some African countries although some languages are being discovered, others are dying. This is a daunting reality. As a result, many African governments have been forced by such circumstances to choose



colonial languages as official media of communication, to sidetrack the bickering and in-fighting over which indigenous languages should be made official. By choosing ex-colonial languages as official does this choice not make the latter privileged and superior?

CONCLUSION

One of the challenges in the issue of language and education in decolonization has been that of poverty and illiteracy. English, French, Portuguese and the other ex-colonial languages though preferred are not spoken by the majority of Africans. One has to go to school. Given the challenges of poverty, few Africans can afford to invest in education. The fear however is that maintaining the ex-colonial languages as official will create an elite class of those who are rich and who can afford the current educational system.

Thus, the controversy over which language should become the official medium of expression in African countries becomes a battle for control between the masses and the elites. If this controversy is allowed to cascade to the language of instruction, is there any pedagogical merit in maintaining the languages of ex-colonialists or moving to an indigenous language? Does the preference of indigenous languages promote development? If language is just a tool, would indigenous languages offer better access to democracy, education and community development?

The issue of the most appropriate language of instruction in post-colonial Africa remains a thorny and controversial one. On the one hand, there is the desire to free indigenous African languages from colonial domination and raise them up to levels of national importance. However, there is also the desire among Africans to cope up with global trends, especially as these apply to business, communication, and technology. Would indigenous African languages rise up to the occasion? This remains a nagging bug flying in the face of the prospects of authentic and substantial African development.

REFERENCES

- Badru, S.A. (2015). Teacher's Assessment of the Objective of upper Basic Education Yoruba language curriculum in Oyo North Senatorial District, Nigeria. *International Journal of Educational Issues* 5, 1.
- Benson, K. (2013). *Language issues in Comparative Education*. Rotterdam: Sense Publishers.
- Berry, J. (1970). Marginality, stress and ethnic identification in an acculturated Aboriginal community. *Journal of Cross-Cultural Psychology* 1, 239-252.
- Berry, J. (1992). Acculturation and adaptation in a new society. *International Migration* 30, 69-85.
- Berry, J. (1997). Immigration, acculturation and adaptation. *Applied Psychology: An International Review* 46, 5-68.
- Berry, J. (2001). A psychology of immigration. *Journal of Social Issues* 57, 611-627.

- Berry, J., Trimble, J. & Olmedo, E. (1986). The assessment of acculturation. In W.J. Lonner & J.W. Berry (Eds.). *Field methods in cross-cultural research*. Hewbury Park. CA: Sage.
- Chebanne, A. (2014). Internal Colonialism of the Khoisan: Consequences. *BOLESWA Journal of Theology, Religion and Philosophy* 4, 2.
- Edwards, W. (2010). *Motor Learning and Control: From Theory to Practice*. Belmont, CA: Cengage Learning.
- Heyns, C. & Killander, M. (2010). *Compendium of Key Human Rights Documents of the African Union*.
- Horkheimer, M. 1982. *Critical Theory Selected Essays*. New York: Continuum Publishing.
- Keppel, G. & Benton, U. (1962). "Proactive inhibition in short-term retention of single items". *Journal of Verbal Learning and Verbal Behavior* Vol 1, No 3, 153–161.
- Mahlatsi, J. (2017). Botho/Ubuntu Philosophy: Education from Childhood to Adulthood in Africa. *International Journal on Scientific and Technology Research* 6, 8.
- Masaku, J. (2007). The Role of the African Languages Research Institute in Addressing Language of Instruction Dilemmas in Zimbabwe. *Lexicos* 17, 340-348.
- Mosweunyane, D. (2013). The African Educational Evolution: From Traditional Training to Formal Education. *Higher Education Studies* 3, 4.
- Overview report of the Research Project by the International Labor Organization and the African Commission on Human and People's Rights on the Constitutional and Legislative protection of the Rights of Indigenous Peoples in 24 African countries 2009*. Geneva. ILO Cataloging in Publication Data.
- Padilla, A. (1980). The role of cultural awareness and ethnic loyalty in acculturation. In A. Padilla (Ed.). *Acculturation: Theory, models and some new findings* (pp.47-84). Boulder: Westview Press.
- Prah, K. (n.d.). The Language of Instruction Conundrum in Africa. CASAS.
- Sebotsa, M. (2018). *Language, Science and Translation within a Socio-Developmental Context in Lesotho*. National University of Lesotho International Science, Technology and Innovation Conference and Expo. Maseru. Nulstice.
- Selepeng, J. (2001). Chemistry Education. *Research and Practice in Europe* Vol 2, No 1, 19-29.



UNHRC – EMRIP, (2012). Expert Mechanism on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples: Study on the role of languages and culture in the promotion and protection of the rights and identities of indigenous peoples. United Nations Human Rights Council.

Wa Thiongo, N. (1986). *Decolonizing the Mind: The Politics of Language in African Literature*. James Currey.

Wa Thiongo, N. (n.d). *Decolonizing the Mind: The Politics of Language in African Literature*.