International Journal of Education, Learning and Development, 14 (1),57-85, 2026
Print ISSN: 2054-6297(Print)
Online ISSN: 2054-6300 (Online)
Website: https://www.eajournals.org/
Publication of the European Centre for Research Training and Development-UK

Language, Power, and Decolonial Futures: Rethinking Language Policy in Postcolonial Africa

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doi: https://doi.org/10.37745/ijeld.2013/vol14n15785 Published March 14, 2026

Citation: Munyangeyo T. (2026) Language, Power, and Decolonial Futures: Rethinking Language Policy in Postcolonial Africa, *International Journal of Education, Learning and Development*, 14 (1),57-85

Abstract: *Since UNESCO's 1953 report The Use of Vernacular Languages in Education advocated mother-tongue education, language policy has been widely recognised as a critical factor in promoting equitable education, social inclusion, and cultural sustainability. Despite extensive policy commitments, pilot initiatives, and strong empirical evidence demonstrating the pedagogical and socio-political value of African languages, most postcolonial African states continue to privilege former colonial languages as the primary media of instruction and governance. Although existing scholarship has documented challenges in policy implementation, it has largely examined language policy failure through technical, economic, or administrative lenses, thereby overlooking the structural and political forces that sustain linguistic hierarchies. The present study adopts a decolonial theoretical framework informed by the concepts of (de)coloniality, linguistic capital, and epistemic justice to conceptualise language policy as a contested site of power rather than informed planning. The study uses a qualitative critical policy analysis of international declarations, national language policy documents, and selected empirical studies from sub-Saharan Africa to examine the persistent failure of language policy reforms. The findings reveal that the continued dominance of colonial languages is not primarily the result of linguistic planning incapacity but reflects enduring colonial legacies embedded in state institutions, elite reproduction, and global regimes of linguistic legitimacy. These dynamics systematically marginalise African languages and undermine the sustainability of multilingual education reforms. The paper argues that meaningful language policy reform requires re-centring African languages as legitimate instruments of education, governance, and knowledge production, with important implications for linguistic justice, democratic participation, and postcolonial transformation.*

Keywords: African languages; decolonial theory; language policy; linguistic legitimacy; multilingual education

INTRODUCTION

Language policy occupies a central position in debates about education, governance, and social justice in multilingual societies. Across the African continent, where linguistic diversity is among the richest in the world, decisions about which languages are used in schools, government institutions, and public communication have profound implications for educational access, democratic participation, and cultural sustainability (Heine and Nurse, 2000). Despite the recognition of linguistic diversity as a

resource rather than a problem, language policy in many postcolonial African states continues to privilege former colonial languages such as English, French, and Portuguese as the primary languages of education, administration, and knowledge production.

This situation persists despite decades of advocacy for the use of African languages in education. Since the publication of UNESCO's influential report *The Use of Vernacular Languages in Education* in 1953, international organisations, educational researchers, and policymakers have repeatedly emphasised the pedagogical benefits of mother-tongue instruction, particularly in the early years of schooling (UNESCO, 1953). A substantial body of research demonstrates that children learn more effectively when taught in languages they understand, and that strong literacy skills developed in the first language can facilitate the acquisition of additional languages (Cummins, 2000; Heugh, 2011). On this basis, multilingual education models have been widely promoted as a means of improving educational outcomes and reducing inequalities within linguistically diverse societies.

However, the implementation of such policies has remained uneven and often limited in scope across much of sub-Saharan Africa. While many countries formally recognise the importance of vernacular languages within education systems, in practice the use of African languages is frequently confined to the early years of primary education, after which colonial languages become the dominant medium of instruction. This pattern has led scholars to describe a persistent gap between language policy rhetoric and policy implementation (Bamgbose, 2000; Ricento, 2006).

Much of the existing literature explains this gap in terms of practical or administrative challenges. Commonly cited obstacles include limited financial resources, shortages of trained teachers, inadequate teaching materials, and the logistical difficulties associated with implementing multilingual curricula in highly diverse linguistic environments (Trudell and Piper, 2014). While these factors are undoubtedly significant, explanations that focus primarily on technical constraints risk overlooking the deeper structural and political dynamics that shape language policy decisions.

Language policy is not simply a matter of educational planning but also a reflection of broader social hierarchies and power relations. The privileging of colonial languages within African states reflects historical processes through which these languages became associated with authority, modernity, and economic opportunity (Mazrui & Mazrui, 1998). These associations have continued to influence language policy long after the end of formal colonial rule.

This analysis argues that understanding the persistence of colonial languages in African education systems requires situating language policy within the broader framework of coloniality, linguistic capital, and epistemic justice. Rather than viewing language policy failure primarily as a result of administrative incapacity, the study conceptualises language policy as a contested arena in which historical legacies, elite interests, and global linguistic hierarchies intersect.

Using a qualitative critical policy analysis of international declarations, national policy documents, and existing empirical research, the study examines how linguistic hierarchies are reproduced within policy frameworks and educational institutions across sub-Saharan Africa. The study demonstrates that the continued dominance of colonial languages reflects enduring colonial structures embedded within state institutions, systems of elite reproduction, and global regimes of linguistic legitimacy.

By bringing together insights from decolonial theory, geopolitics and geostrategic alignment, and language policy studies, this research paper contributes to ongoing debates about the role of language in postcolonial transformation. It argues that meaningful language policy reform requires re-centring African languages not only as pedagogical tools but also and mainly as legitimate instruments of governance, knowledge production, and democratic participation.

Rationale and research questions

The persistence of colonial languages in African education systems has often been treated as a technical challenge rather than a structural problem. Many policy discussions assume that with sufficient resources, political will, and administrative capacity, multilingual education reforms can be successfully implemented. However, decades of reform efforts have produced limited structural change.

This persistent gap between policy aspirations and practice raises important questions. Why do reforms promoting African languages rarely move beyond the early years of schooling? Why do colonial languages continue to dominate high-status domains such as secondary education, governance, and knowledge production?

Addressing these questions requires shifting the analytical focus from policy implementation to the political economy of language. Language policies are embedded within broader systems of power that shape which languages policies are considered legitimate, valuable, and worthy of institutional support (Bourdieu, 1991; Ricento, 2006).

Decolonial scholarship offers a useful framework for understanding these dynamics. The concept of coloniality highlights how colonial systems of knowledge and power continue to structure social hierarchies long after the formal colonialism has ended (Quijano, 2000). Within this framework, language becomes a key site through which epistemic dominance is reproduced.

This study therefore seeks to address the following research questions:

1. How have colonial linguistic hierarchies shaped language policy in postcolonial African states?

2. Why have reforms promoting African languages struggled to achieve sustained institutionalisation?

3. What implications do these dynamics have for the future of multilingual education and linguistic justice in Africa?

LITERATURE REVIEW

Colonial legacies and the persistence of exoglossic language regimes

Language policy in postcolonial Africa cannot be understood without examining the colonial foundations that continue to structure linguistic hierarchies across the continent. Colonial administrations institutionalised European languages, primarily English, French, and Portuguese, as

the languages of governance, education, and socio-economic advancement. These languages functioned as instruments of administrative control and social stratification, producing elite groups whose political and economic power was tied to colonial linguistic systems (Bamgbose, 1991; Mazrui and Mazrui, 1998).

Despite political independence, many African states retained these colonial linguistic arrangements. Such arrangements created what scholars describe as exoglossic language policies, which are systems in which foreign languages dominate formal domains while indigenous languages remain marginalised (Brock-Utne, 2017a, 2017b; Heugh, 2011; Heugh, 2012). Such policies often persist because colonial languages are perceived as neutral and strategic lingua francas capable of bridging ethnic and linguistic diversity within multilingual societies (Ouane and Glanz, 2011). However, this perceived cohesive and neutrality role of lingua francas masks the structural inequalities embedded within linguistic hierarchies.

Recent scholarship increasingly emphasises that the persistence of colonial languages reflects deeper political and ideological dynamics rather than purely pragmatic considerations. For example, Munyaradzi (2024) argues that contemporary language policies in African higher education are shaped by the combined effects of colonial legacies and neoliberal globalisation, which reinforce the dominance of English as a language of academic prestige and international competitiveness. Similarly, Chakrani, Ziad, and Lachkar (2025) demonstrate that language-in-education policies often conceal underlying political and economic agendas, which highlight the need to analyse language policy not simplistically as technical planning but as an arena of ideological contestation.

These perspectives resonate with broader arguments in postcolonial studies that coloniality, which means the enduring structures of power, knowledge, and authority produced by colonialism, continues to shape contemporary institutions (Mignolo, 2011; Quijano, 2007). Within this framework, language policy becomes a crucial mechanism through which colonial power relations are reproduced in postcolonial contexts.

Language, power, and linguistic capital

A central theoretical lens for understanding the persistence of colonial languages is Bourdieu's concept of linguistic capital. According to Bourdieu (1991), languages are not simple communication tools, but they are rather forms of symbolic capital that confer social prestige and access to economic opportunities. In societies where colonial languages are associated with education, governance, and international mobility, they acquire higher symbolic value than indigenous languages.

This dynamic has been widely observed across Africa, where proficiency in colonial languages often determines access to employment, higher education, and political participation (Heugh, 2011; Makoni and Pennycook, 2007). As a result, linguistic hierarchies become embedded in social structures, which reinforces inequalities between linguistic groups.

Recent research continues to demonstrate how these hierarchies operate in contemporary educational systems. Probyn (2024), for example, shows that language policies requiring early transitions to English in South African schools frequently disadvantage learners whose home languages differ from

the language of instruction. Such policies create significant learning barriers and contribute to persistent educational inequalities.

Similarly, studies on multilingual pedagogies highlight the tension between official language policies and actual linguistic practices in classrooms. Mbirimi-Hungwe and Matariro-Mutanha (2024) find that although translanguaging approaches acknowledge students' multilingual repertoires, English often remains the dominant language in teaching materials and institutional practices. This reveals how linguistic hierarchies persist even within ostensibly multilingual educational frameworks.

More recent research work also demonstrates how linguistic capital intersects with global knowledge economies. Research on African universities shows that English-language scholarship often receives greater international visibility. This reinforces incentives for institutions to prioritise English despite official commitments to multilingualism (Munyaradzi, 2024). Consequently, the symbolic power of colonial languages continues to shape academic knowledge production and dissemination.

Multilingual education and pedagogical evidence

The pedagogical advantages of mother-tongue instruction have been widely documented for decades. UNESCO's early advocacy for mother-tongue education emphasised that learners acquire literacy and conceptual understanding more effectively when instruction occurs in languages they understand (UNESCO, 1953). Subsequent research has consistently confirmed these findings across diverse contexts.

Empirical studies demonstrate that children who begin schooling in their first language tend to achieve higher levels of literacy, cognitive development, and academic performance compared to those educated exclusively in second languages (Heugh, 2011; Ouane and Glanz, 2011). These findings have encouraged many international organisations to promote multilingual education models that integrate local languages into formal schooling.

Recent policy guidance from UNESCO continues to stress the importance of multilingual education for improving learning outcomes and social inclusion. According to UNESCO (2025), a significant proportion of learners globally lack access to education in languages they fully understand, a situation that disproportionately affects students in low- and middle-income countries. This international organisation argues that multilingual education systems can improve educational equity by enabling learners to build foundational knowledge in their home languages before transitioning to additional languages.

Research conducted across sub-Saharan Africa further demonstrates how multilingual pedagogical practices can enhance classroom learning. A recent study examining teachers' strategies in multilingual classrooms found that educators frequently employ code-switching, translanguaging, and culturally contextualised examples to support learners whose linguistic backgrounds differ from the official language of instruction (Mahlobo et al., 2025). These practices highlight the creative ways teachers navigate linguistic diversity despite policy constraints.

However, despite strong empirical evidence supporting multilingual education, the implementation of such policies remains uneven across Africa. While many countries formally recognise local languages in education policy, the actual use of these languages in classrooms often remains limited due to resource constraints, teacher training gaps, and ideological resistance.

Decolonial perspectives on language policy

Decolonial theory provides a powerful framework for analysing why multilingual language policies frequently fail in postcolonial contexts. Unlike traditional policy approaches that emphasise technical planning or administrative capacity, decolonial scholars argue that language policy is deeply embedded in broader systems of knowledge production and political power.

Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o's highly influential work on linguistic decolonisation emphasises that colonial languages do not just function as communication tools but also shape cultural consciousness and epistemological frameworks (Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o, 1986). By privileging colonial languages in education and literature, postcolonial societies risk alienating intellectual production from local cultural contexts.

More recent decolonial scholarship has expanded this argument by examining how global knowledge systems reinforce linguistic hierarchies. Mignolo (2011) and Santos (2018) argue that modern academic institutions privilege Western epistemologies while marginalising alternative knowledge traditions. In this context, language becomes a key mechanism through which epistemic dominance is sustainably harnessed.

Within African higher education, these dynamics manifest in the prioritisation of English-language scholarship and curricula rooted in Eurocentric intellectual traditions. Munyaradzi (2024) demonstrates that neoliberal reforms in universities often reinforce these patterns by emphasising international rankings, global competitiveness, and publication in English-language journals.

Similarly, contemporary debates on translanguaging and multilingual pedagogy highlight the tension between decolonial aspirations and institutional realities. While translanguaging approaches challenge monolingual language ideologies, their implementation often remains constrained by broader structural forces that privilege colonial languages (Mbirimi-Hungwe and Matariro-Mutanha, 2024).

Recent studies exploring multilingual education through decolonial frameworks emphasise that language policies cannot be effectively reformed without addressing the structural inequalities embedded in postcolonial institutions. These inequalities include global academic hierarchies, labour market incentives, and state governance structures that favour colonial languages over indigenous linguistic systems.

Language policy, knowledge production, and epistemic justice

The marginalisation of African languages in education and governance also has profound implications for epistemic justice, such as the fair recognition and inclusion of diverse knowledge systems in public

discourse (Fricker, 2007). When colonial languages dominate academic and governmental institutions, knowledge produced in indigenous languages often receives less recognition or legitimacy.

These dynamics contribute to what scholars describe as epistemic exclusion, in which certain forms of knowledge are systematically marginalised because they are expressed in languages that lack institutional prestige (Santos, 2018). In African contexts, this exclusion frequently affects indigenous knowledge systems related to culture, history, agriculture, medicine, and environmental management.

Recent research outputs emphasise that strengthening African languages in education and research can play a crucial role in addressing these epistemic inequalities. Probyn (2024) argues that recognising learners' home languages as legitimate resources for learning can transform classroom practices and empower students to engage with knowledge production more critically.

Technological developments also offer new possibilities for expanding the use of African languages in knowledge production. Emerging research on language technologies demonstrates that digital tools, including machine translation and language modelling, can support the development of linguistic resources for historically marginalised languages (Malinga et al., 2024). Such innovations may help address longstanding challenges related to terminology development and academic publishing in African languages.

At the same time, scholars caution that technological solutions alone cannot resolve structural inequalities in language policy. Without broader institutional reforms, digital tools risk reproducing existing linguistic hierarchies by prioritising languages with greater economic and political influence.

The political economy of language policy reform

While much of the literature on language policy emphasises pedagogical considerations, recent scholarship increasingly highlights the importance of political economy in shaping language policy outcomes. Decisions about language use in education and governance are often influenced by broader economic and political incentives.

Colonial languages frequently function as gateways to global markets, international diplomacy, and higher education opportunities abroad. As a result, political elites may resist efforts to prioritise indigenous languages if such reforms are perceived as limiting access to global economic networks.

This dynamic contributes to what some scholars describe as elite closure, whereby linguistic systems serve to reproduce existing social hierarchies by restricting access to prestigious domains (Bourdieu, 1991). In many African countries, proficiency in colonial languages remains a key requirement for entry into government positions, corporate employment, and higher education.

Recent studies illustrate how these dynamics shape language policy debates. Munyaradzi (2024) argues that neoliberal governance models encourage universities to prioritise languages associated with global academic prestige, reinforcing the dominance of English in higher education. Similarly, Chakrani et al. (2025) demonstrate that language policy decisions often reflect broader geopolitical and economic considerations rather than purely educational objectives.

Consequently, meaningful language policy reform requires addressing the structural incentives that sustain linguistic hierarchies. This includes rethinking the role of African languages in economic development, governance, and international engagement.

Toward a decolonial language policy framework

The literature reviewed above suggests that language policy reform in Africa must move beyond technocratic approaches that focus solely on curriculum design or teacher training. Instead, scholars increasingly call for decolonial language policy frameworks that address the deeper structural forces sustaining linguistic hierarchies.

Such frameworks emphasise several key principles. First, they advocate recognising African languages as legitimate languages of knowledge production, capable of supporting advanced scholarship and scientific discourse. Second, they emphasise the importance of multilingual governance systems that enable citizens to engage with state institutions in languages they understand. Third, they highlight the need to transform global academic hierarchies that privilege English-language scholarship.

Recent initiatives across Africa demonstrate growing momentum toward these goals. Universities and research institutions are increasingly experimenting with multilingual teaching models, terminology development projects, and translation initiatives aimed at expanding the use of African languages in higher education and research.

However, achieving sustainable change will require coordinated efforts across multiple levels of governance, including national governments, educational institutions, and international organisations. Without addressing the broader political economy of language policy, reforms risk remaining symbolic rather than transformative.

METHODOLOGY

This study adopts a qualitative critical policy analysis to examine the structural dynamics that shape language policy in postcolonial Africa and to explore why policy commitments supporting African languages have not translated into sustained institutional change. Language policy is not only a set of administrative decisions regarding language use but represents a complex political arena where questions of identity, power, knowledge production, and social inequality are negotiated (Ricento, 2006). Understanding the persistence of colonial languages within African education systems therefore requires a methodological approach capable of interrogating both policy discourse and the broader ideological structures within which policies are produced and implemented. A qualitative critical policy approach is particularly suited to this task because it enables researchers to examine how power relations and historical structures shape policy formation, interpretation, and implementation (Rizvi and Lingard, 2010).

Critical policy analysis departs from traditional policy analysis by rejecting the assumption that policy represents a neutral or purely technical instrument designed to solve social problems. Instead, it views policy as a socially constructed and politically contested process embedded within broader structures of power and inequality (Ball, 1993). Policies reflect the interests, values, and ideologies of dominant

social actors and therefore play an important role in reproducing or challenging existing power relations. Within the field of language policy research, this perspective has been particularly influential because language choices are closely tied to questions of political authority, cultural identity, and access to economic opportunity (Tollefson, 2013). In multilingual societies such as those found across Africa, decisions regarding the language of instruction or official language status have profound implications for social inclusion, educational equity, and cultural sustainability.

The methodological approach adopted in this study is informed by the understanding that language policy cannot be analysed in isolation from its historical and political context. Colonialism profoundly reshaped linguistic hierarchies across the African continent by institutionalising European languages as instruments of governance, administration, and education (Mazrui and Mazrui, 1998). Although many African countries gained political independence in the mid-twentieth century, the linguistic structures established during colonial rule largely remained intact. These structures continue to shape contemporary language policies and influence the perceived legitimacy of different languages within education systems and public institutions. The persistence of colonial languages in postcolonial states therefore reflects not only practical considerations but also deeper historical and ideological dynamics. In order to capture these dynamics, this study draws on critical policy analysis combined with qualitative document analysis to investigate the discourses and institutional arrangements that sustain linguistic hierarchies.

Qualitative document analysis forms the empirical basis of the study. Policy documents represent an important source of data for researchers interested in understanding how governments and international organisations conceptualise social problems and propose solutions (Bowen, 2009). Documents do not simply record policy decisions; they also articulate the assumptions, priorities, and ideological positions that underpin those decisions. In the field of language policy research, official documents such as national education policies, language-in-education frameworks, and international declarations provide valuable insight into the ways in which language hierarchies are constructed and legitimised (Johnson, 2013). Document analysis allows researchers to trace how particular discourses become institutionalised within policy frameworks and how these discourses influence educational practice.

The study draws on three primary categories of documents. The first category consists of international policy declarations and frameworks relating to language and education, particularly those produced by international organisations such as UNESCO. International policy frameworks play an important role in shaping national language policies by promoting certain norms and principles regarding linguistic rights, multilingual education, and cultural diversity (Ricento, 2006). UNESCO's 1953 report *The Use of Vernacular Languages in Education*, for example, remains a foundational document advocating the use of mother-tongue instruction in early education. Subsequent UNESCO reports and global education initiatives have continued to emphasise the importance of linguistic inclusion and culturally responsive education. Examining these documents provides insight into the global discourses that inform language policy debates and influence national policy agendas.

The second category of documents consists of national language policy frameworks and education policy documents from selected sub-Saharan African countries. These documents typically outline official positions regarding the status of different languages, the language of instruction in schools, and the role of indigenous languages in public life. While policy frameworks vary across countries,

many share common features, including the recognition of indigenous languages alongside the continued use of colonial languages as official or administrative languages. Analysing these policy texts enables the study to identify patterns and contradictions in the way African languages are positioned within national education systems.

The third category of sources consists of peer-reviewed empirical studies examining language policy implementation and multilingual education reforms across sub-Saharan Africa. Incorporating empirical research allows the study to situate policy discourse within the realities of educational practice. Numerous studies have documented the challenges associated with implementing mother-tongue education programmes, including shortages of teaching materials, insufficient teacher training, and political resistance (Heugh, 2011; Trudell and Piper, 2014). By analysing this body of research alongside policy documents, the study seeks to explore how policy intentions interact with institutional constraints and broader sociopolitical dynamics.

Theoretical framework

Understanding the persistence of colonial languages in postcolonial African language policy requires a theoretical framework capable of addressing the intersection of language, power, and knowledge production. Traditional language policy studies often focus on institutional planning, administrative capacity, or pedagogical effectiveness (Spolsky, 2004; Shohamy, 2006). While these approaches provide valuable insights into policy design and implementation, they tend to treat language policy as a technical or managerial problem rather than a political phenomenon embedded in historical power relations.

This study adopts an interdisciplinary theoretical framework that integrates Bourdieu's theory of linguistic capital, decolonial theory, and epistemic justice. Together, these perspectives provide analytical tools for understanding how language policies function as mechanisms of social stratification, cultural domination, and epistemological exclusion in postcolonial contexts. Rather than viewing the dominance of colonial languages as a consequence of policy failure or logistical limitations, the framework conceptualises language policy as a contested field of power in which linguistic hierarchies are actively produced and reproduced.

Linguistic capital and symbolic power

Pierre Bourdieu's theory of linguistic capital provides a foundational lens for analysing how language operates within systems of social power. Bourdieu (1991) argues that language functions not only as a medium of communication but also as a form of symbolic capital that confers social legitimacy, prestige, and access to resources. Within any given society, certain linguistic varieties become recognised as "legitimate languages," while others are marginalised or devalued. These hierarchies are sustained through institutions such as education systems, state bureaucracies, and cultural institutions that regulate what forms of language are considered authoritative or acceptable.

In colonial and postcolonial contexts, European languages, particularly English, French, and Portuguese, became institutionalised as the dominant forms of linguistic capital. Colonial administrations established these languages as the languages of governance, education, and economic

advancement, thereby linking linguistic competence to social mobility and political power (Mazrui and Mazrui, 1998; Bamgbose, 1991). Access to colonial language proficiency became a key determinant of elite status, creating what Bourdieu describes as a linguistic market in which certain languages command higher symbolic value than others.

These dynamics continue to shape contemporary language policies across Africa. Educational systems frequently prioritise colonial languages as the primary medium of instruction, while indigenous languages remain confined to informal or early childhood educational contexts (Heugh, 2011; Brock-Utne, 2017a, 2017b). As a result, linguistic hierarchies established during colonial rule are reproduced through modern state institutions. Students who lack proficiency in colonial languages often face structural disadvantages in educational attainment, employment opportunities, and political participation.

Importantly, Bourdieu's framework emphasises that linguistic hierarchies are not natural or inevitable but are produced through institutionalised power relations. The legitimacy of a particular language derives from the authority of institutions that recognise and reproduce its symbolic value. In postcolonial African states, colonial languages retain legitimacy because they remain embedded within systems of governance, education, and global economic exchange. Consequently, attempts to promote African languages in education often encounter resistance from political and economic elites whose social capital is tied to the continued dominance of colonial linguistic norms.

However, while Bourdieu's theory provides a powerful explanation of linguistic inequality, it does not fully account for the historical and geopolitical dimensions of colonial power that shaped these linguistic markets. To address this limitation, the present study incorporates insights from decolonial theory.

Decoloniality and the coloniality of language

Decolonial theory extends the analysis of linguistic power by situating language hierarchies within broader structures of coloniality. The concept of coloniality, developed by scholars such as Aníbal Quijano (2007) and Walter Mignolo (2011), refers to the enduring patterns of power, knowledge, and cultural authority established during colonialism that persist long after formal political independence. These structures continue to shape global hierarchies of knowledge, identity, and language.

Within this framework, language plays a central role in the production and maintenance of coloniality. Colonial languages were not only administrative tools but also vehicles for transmitting European epistemologies, cultural norms, and political authority. As Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o (1986) famously argued, the imposition of colonial languages in education functioned as a mechanism of cultural domination, alienating African societies from their linguistic and intellectual traditions.

Decolonial scholars argue that contemporary language policies in many postcolonial states reproduce these colonial power structures by maintaining the dominance of European languages in education, governance, and knowledge production (Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2013; Santos, 2018). Even where African languages are formally recognised in national constitutions or educational policies, their institutional status often remains subordinate to that of colonial languages.

This persistence reflects what Mignolo (2011) describes as the coloniality of knowledge, which relates to the global hierarchy of epistemologies that privileges Western forms of knowledge while marginalising alternative intellectual traditions. Because colonial languages function as the primary medium through which knowledge circulates within global academic and economic systems, they acquire disproportionate prestige and authority. Consequently, African languages are often perceived as unsuitable for advanced education, scientific discourse, or technological development.

Decolonial perspectives therefore reframe language policy not simply as an educational or administrative issue but as part of a broader struggle over cultural sovereignty and epistemological autonomy. Efforts to promote African languages in education represent attempts to challenge entrenched colonial power structures and to reassert linguistic and intellectual diversity within global knowledge systems.

However, decolonial theory alone does not fully capture the ethical implications of linguistic marginalisation, particularly in relation to the recognition of diverse knowledge traditions. For this reason, the present study also draws on the concept of epistemic justice.

Epistemic justice and the politics of knowledge production

The concept of epistemic justice, developed by Miranda Fricker (2007), provides a normative framework for analysing how linguistic hierarchies influence the recognition and legitimacy of knowledge. Epistemic injustice occurs when individuals or communities are unfairly disadvantaged in their capacity as knowers, either because their knowledge is dismissed or because structural conditions prevent them from participating fully in processes of knowledge production.

In the context of language policy, epistemic injustice often manifests through the marginalisation of knowledge expressed in minority or indigenous languages. When educational institutions and academic systems privilege colonial languages as the primary medium of scholarship, knowledge produced in African languages may be excluded from formal intellectual discourse. This exclusion not only limits the visibility of indigenous knowledge systems but also undermines the intellectual agency of communities whose linguistic repertoires differ from dominant academic norms.

Boaventura de Sousa Santos (2018) extends this argument through his concept of the epistemologies of the South, which emphasises the importance of recognising diverse knowledge traditions that have historically been marginalised by Western epistemological frameworks. From this perspective, linguistic diversity is not merely a cultural resource but a crucial foundation for epistemological pluralism.

In African contexts, the marginalisation of indigenous languages in education and research has significant implications for knowledge production. Local knowledge related to agriculture, medicine, environmental management, and cultural heritage is often embedded within specific linguistic frameworks that cannot easily be translated into colonial languages without losing important conceptual nuances (Hountondji, 1997). Consequently, the dominance of colonial languages in academic institutions can lead to the systematic exclusion of valuable knowledge traditions.

Integrating epistemic justice into language policy analysis highlights the ethical dimension of linguistic inequality. The issue is not simply whether African languages are pedagogically effective or economically useful, but whether speakers of these languages are recognised as legitimate participants in intellectual and political life.

Integrating linguistic capital, decoloniality, and epistemic justice

While each of the theoretical perspectives discussed earlier, including Bourdieu's concept of linguistic capital, decolonial theory, and the framework of epistemic justice, provides significant insights into the dynamics of language policy, their analytical value becomes considerably stronger when they are examined in combination. Individually, these perspectives illuminate different dimensions of how language operates within systems of power, but together they allow for a more comprehensive understanding of how linguistic hierarchies are historically produced, institutionally reproduced, and ethically contested. Integrating these approaches makes it possible to conceptualise language policy not merely as a technical instrument of governance or educational planning but as a complex field in which power relations are negotiated across social, political, and epistemological domains.

Bourdieu's theory of linguistic capital provides a crucial starting point for understanding the structural dimensions of language policy. For Bourdieu (1991), language is not simply a neutral medium of communication; rather, it functions as a form of symbolic capital that can be accumulated, exchanged, and converted into other forms of social advantage. Within any society, certain linguistic forms are recognised as legitimate or authoritative, while others are marginalised or stigmatised. These hierarchies emerge through institutional processes that regulate which languages are valued in domains such as education, governance, and economic exchange. Educational institutions, in particular, play a key role in reproducing linguistic hierarchies by legitimising certain varieties of language as the standard for intellectual and professional communication. As a result, individuals who possess proficiency in the dominant language gain access to social mobility, employment opportunities, and political participation, while those whose linguistic repertoires fall outside the recognised norm face structural disadvantages.

In many postcolonial contexts, especially in Africa, the linguistic markets described by Bourdieu remain deeply shaped by the legacies of colonial rule. Colonial administrations institutionalised European languages, primarily English, French, and Portuguese, as the languages of governance, administration, and formal education. These languages became embedded within state institutions and were subsequently associated with modernity, prestige, and upward mobility (Bamgbose, 1991; Mazrui and Mazrui, 1998). As a result, colonial languages acquired high symbolic value within the linguistic market, while indigenous languages were often relegated to informal or domestic domains. Even after political independence, many African states retained colonial languages as official languages and as the primary medium of instruction in education systems, thereby reinforcing their status as forms of linguistic capital. From a Bourdieusian perspective, this persistence can be explained by the fact that linguistic capital is reproduced through institutional structures that continue to reward proficiency in dominant languages.

However, while Bourdieu's framework effectively explains how linguistic hierarchies operate within social institutions, it does not fully address the historical and geopolitical origins of these hierarchies.

Decolonial theory offers an important extension by situating contemporary linguistic inequalities within the broader structures of colonial power that shaped the modern global order. The concept of coloniality, introduced by Quijano (2007), refers to the enduring patterns of power that emerged during colonialism and continue to influence political, cultural, and epistemological relations long after formal colonial administrations have ended. These patterns include the hierarchical classification of cultures, knowledge systems, and languages according to Eurocentric norms.

Within this framework, language is not simply a social resource but also a mechanism through which colonial power has historically been exercised and maintained. Colonial languages functioned as instruments for the transmission of European cultural values and epistemological frameworks, establishing what Mignolo (2011) describes as a global hierarchy of knowledge in which Western intellectual traditions occupy a privileged position. The dominance of European languages in education and academic institutions has therefore had profound consequences for how knowledge is produced and legitimised. African languages, despite their cultural and intellectual richness, have often been excluded from formal domains of knowledge production, reinforcing the perception that they are unsuitable for scientific or scholarly discourse.

Decolonial scholars argue that the persistence of colonial languages in postcolonial educational systems reflects the continued influence of colonial epistemologies and institutional arrangements. Even when African states attempt to implement multilingual language policies or promote indigenous languages in education, these initiatives frequently encounter resistance from political elites, economic structures, and global knowledge networks that remain aligned with the prestige of colonial languages. Thus, from a decolonial perspective, language policy must be understood within the broader context of coloniality, which is a system that continues to shape cultural authority, intellectual legitimacy, and global power relations.

While decolonial theory highlights the historical and structural foundations of linguistic inequality, the concept of epistemic justice provides an ethical framework for evaluating its consequences. Fricker (2007) introduces the notion of epistemic injustice to describe situations in which individuals or groups are unfairly disadvantaged in their capacity as knowers. Such injustice can occur when people's knowledge is dismissed due to prejudice or when structural barriers prevent them from participating fully in processes of knowledge creation and dissemination. In linguistic contexts, epistemic injustice often arises when certain languages are privileged as legitimate vehicles of knowledge while others are systematically excluded from academic or institutional discourse.

The marginalisation of African languages in education and research illustrates this dynamic clearly. When colonial languages dominate academic institutions, knowledge expressed in indigenous languages may struggle to gain recognition or legitimacy. This not only limits the participation of speakers of those languages in intellectual debates but also constrains the transmission of local knowledge systems that are embedded within specific linguistic traditions. Santos (2018) emphasises that linguistic diversity is closely tied to epistemological diversity, arguing that the dominance of Western languages in global academia contributes to what he terms the "cognitive empire," in which alternative ways of knowing are marginalised or rendered invisible. From the perspective of epistemic justice, language policy therefore has significant implications for whose knowledge is valued and whose perspectives are excluded from the production of legitimate knowledge.

When these three perspectives, such as linguistic capital, decoloniality, and epistemic justice, are integrated, language policy can be conceptualised as a multidimensional system of power that operates simultaneously across social, political, and epistemological domains. Within this system, colonial languages perform several interconnected functions. First, they act as forms of symbolic capital that enable access to education, employment, and political authority (Bourdieu, 1991). Second, they serve as instruments of coloniality that reproduce historical patterns of cultural and intellectual domination (Quijano, 2007; Mignolo, 2011). Third, they function as gatekeepers of knowledge production by shaping which forms of knowledge are recognised within academic and institutional contexts (Fricker, 2007; Santos, 2018).

This integrated framework provides important insights into why language policy reforms promoting African languages often face significant structural obstacles. In many cases, governments formally endorse multilingual policies or recognise indigenous languages in constitutional frameworks. However, the deeper systems of linguistic capital, colonial knowledge hierarchies, and epistemic exclusion that sustain the dominance of colonial languages frequently remain unchanged. As long as educational credentials, professional advancement, and academic recognition continue to depend primarily on proficiency in colonial languages, institutional incentives will reinforce their dominance.

Consequently, the persistence of colonial languages in key domains of power cannot be explained solely by practical considerations such as administrative convenience or resource limitations. Rather, it reflects the operation of entrenched systems of power that link language to social mobility, historical domination, and epistemological legitimacy. By conceptualising language policy as a site where these intersecting forces operate, the analytical framework adopted in this study moves beyond explanations that attribute policy failures to technical constraints or bureaucratic inefficiencies. Instead, it highlights how language policy is embedded within broader struggles over social inequality, cultural recognition, and epistemological authority. Addressing linguistic inequality in postcolonial societies therefore requires not only institutional reforms but also a deeper transformation of the power structures that shape how languages—and the knowledge they carry—are valued within contemporary global and national systems.

Implications for analysing language policy in postcolonial Africa

Applying this integrated theoretical framework enables a more critical analysis of language policy reforms across postcolonial African states. It suggests that the persistent dominance of colonial languages should be understood not as an accidental outcome of policy mismanagement but as the result of deeply entrenched structural and ideological dynamics.

These dynamics include the reproduction of elite linguistic capital through education systems, the continued influence of colonial epistemological hierarchies in academic institutions, and global economic pressures that reinforce the prestige of European languages. Addressing these challenges therefore requires more than technical policy adjustments; it requires transformative approaches that confront the historical and structural foundations of linguistic inequality.

Such approaches may include expanding the use of African languages in higher education, developing multilingual governance systems, and promoting research and knowledge production in indigenous

languages. While these reforms present significant practical challenges, they are essential for advancing linguistic justice, democratic participation, and epistemological diversity within postcolonial societies.

Comparative language policy regimes in Francophone and Anglophone Africa

A comparison between Francophone and Anglophone policy regimes reveals both shared challenges and important differences in how language governance is structured. In many Francophone African countries, colonial linguistic structures have been preserved with relatively limited transformation. French continues to function as the primary language of administration, higher education, and formal economic activity, while indigenous languages remain largely confined to informal domains or early primary education. To synthesise the comparative patterns discussed above, Table 1 summarises key features of major language policy regimes observed across selected African contexts. The table highlights how colonial legacies, political priorities, and socio-economic considerations shape language governance in different countries. While these models are necessarily simplified, they illustrate recurring institutional arrangements that structure the relationship between colonial languages and African languages in education and public administration.

Table 1. Comparative language policy regimes in selected African contexts

Policy regime	Representative countries	Core policy orientation	Language of primary education	Language of secondary / higher education	Key policy tensions
Francophone administrative continuity	Senegal, Côte d'Ivoire, Mali	Retention of French as official language for governance and schooling; limited bilingual experimentation	Increasing use of national languages in early primary education	French dominant	Tension between educational inclusion and prestige associated with French
Anglophone global integration	Rwanda, Kenya, Uganda	English prioritised for global economic participation and regional integration	Mixed models using local languages in early primary years	English dominant	Rapid linguistic transition creates pedagogical challenges
National language consolidation	Tanzania	Promotion of an African lingua franca to foster national unity	Kiswahili dominant	English dominant	Transition from Kiswahili to English creates learning gaps
Constitutional multilingualism	South Africa	Formal recognition of multiple official languages; commitment to linguistic equality	Multiple languages depending on region	English dominant in higher education	Symbolic recognition vs limited institutional implementation

The patterns summarised in Table 1 reveal several structural characteristics of language governance across Africa. First, colonial languages remain the dominant medium of instruction at secondary and tertiary levels across most policy regimes. Even in contexts where indigenous languages are used during the early years of schooling, students typically transition to European languages as they progress through the education system. This pattern reflects the enduring association between colonial languages and access to higher education, professional employment, and international knowledge networks (Bourdieu, 1991; Phillipson, 2009).

Second, the table illustrates that the role of African languages in education varies significantly depending on national political priorities. Tanzania represents one of the most sustained attempts to promote an African language, Kiswahili, as a central instrument of national integration and educational access. However, even in this context, English retains its status as the primary language of secondary and higher education, demonstrating the continued influence of global linguistic hierarchies (Heugh, 2011).

Third, the comparison highlights the complex relationship between language policy and nation-building. In countries such as South Africa, the constitutional recognition of multiple languages reflects a commitment to linguistic equality and democratic inclusion. Nevertheless, the practical implementation of multilingual policies often remains constrained by institutional inertia and the continued prestige of English in economic and academic domains (Probyn, 2024).

Finally, the table illustrates how language policy regimes are shaped by broader geopolitical and economic considerations. Rwanda's shift from French to English demonstrates how governments may realign linguistic policy in response to regional integration and global economic strategies (Samuelson & Freedman, 2010). Such shifts illustrate that language policy decisions are rarely driven solely by educational concerns; they are also deeply embedded within broader political and economic transformations.

Taken together, these comparative patterns reinforce the broader argument of this study: that language policy in postcolonial Africa operates within a complex system of linguistic capital, colonial historical legacies, and global regimes of knowledge production. While international organisations such as UNESCO continue to advocate for multilingual education and the use of indigenous languages in schooling (UNESCO, 2016), national policy outcomes remain strongly influenced by the perceived economic and political value of colonial languages.

Senegal provides a representative example of this model. Despite the fact that the majority of the population speaks national languages such as Wolof, Pulaar, and Serer, French retains its status as the official language and the primary language of schooling (Brock-Utne, 2017a, 2017b). Government policies have introduced bilingual education programmes that incorporate national languages into early primary education, but French remains the dominant language at higher levels of schooling and public administration. This arrangement reflects broader historical patterns within Francophone Africa, where the colonial administration established highly centralised education systems designed to reproduce French linguistic and cultural norms.

Scholars have argued that this model reflects the enduring influence of French linguistic ideology, which emphasises linguistic standardisation and the universal value of the French language (Bamgbose, 2000). Within this framework, French is often associated with intellectual authority, administrative competence, and access to global cultural capital. Consequently, efforts to expand the use of indigenous languages in formal institutions frequently encounter resistance from political elites and urban middle classes who benefit from the prestige associated with French-language education.

Anglophone African contexts display somewhat different dynamics, although colonial linguistic hierarchies remain influential. In many Anglophone countries, English functions as the primary language of education and governance, but policy discourse often places greater emphasis on multilingualism and the inclusion of local languages in early education. This approach reflects both the linguistic diversity of many Anglophone states and the influence of international research emphasising the educational benefits of mother-tongue instruction.

Tanzania represents one of the most frequently cited examples of a national language model in Africa. Following independence, the government adopted Kiswahili as a central instrument of national unity and social integration. Kiswahili became the primary medium of instruction in primary education and the dominant language of political communication (Brock-Utne, 2000). This policy played a significant role in strengthening national identity and expanding literacy. However, English continues to function as the language of secondary and higher education, creating a linguistic transition that many students find challenging (Heugh, 2011). The Tanzanian case therefore illustrates both the potential and the limitations of national language policies within global linguistic hierarchies.

The case of Rwanda demonstrates a different trajectory within Anglophone policy regimes. Historically influenced by Belgian colonial rule, Rwanda was predominantly Francophone during the post-independence period. However, in 2008 the government adopted English as the primary language of instruction and administration. This shift was closely linked to Rwanda's strategic orientation toward the East African Community and global economic networks dominated by English (Samuelson & Freedman, 2010). The policy change illustrates how language policy decisions are often shaped by geopolitical considerations and economic aspirations rather than purely educational or epistemic factors.

While the transition to English was intended to enhance Rwanda's international competitiveness, it also generated significant implementation challenges. Teachers and students who had previously been educated in French faced difficulties adapting to English-medium instruction, particularly in subjects requiring specialised vocabulary. Studies have shown that these linguistic transitions can negatively affect classroom comprehension and learning outcomes during the initial phases of implementation (Samuelson & Freedman, 2010). This example highlights the tension between global linguistic integration and the pedagogical realities of multilingual societies.

South Africa presents yet another model of language governance. The country's post-apartheid constitution recognises eleven official languages and explicitly promotes multilingualism as a central component of democratic governance. This policy framework reflects an effort to address the linguistic inequalities created by colonialism and apartheid, which privileged English and Afrikaans while marginalising African languages.

Despite this constitutional commitment to multilingualism, English remains the dominant language of higher education, commerce, and international communication (Probyn, 2024). Universities and professional institutions continue to operate primarily in English, and many students perceive proficiency in English as essential for socio-economic mobility. As a result, African languages have struggled to achieve full institutional recognition in academic and professional domains.

Taken together, these cases reveal several important patterns in African language policy regimes. First, colonial languages continue to occupy central positions within education systems and state institutions across both Francophone and Anglophone contexts. Even where national languages are promoted, they are often confined to primary education or symbolic cultural roles. Second, language policy decisions are closely linked to broader political and economic strategies, including efforts to promote national unity, participate in global economic networks, and maintain administrative continuity.

At the same time, the comparison between Francophone and Anglophone regimes reveals subtle differences in ideological orientation. Francophone language policies tend to emphasise linguistic centralisation and the cultural authority of French, while Anglophone contexts often adopt more explicitly multilingual policy discourses. However, these differences should not obscure the underlying continuity of colonial linguistic hierarchies. In both regimes, European languages remain the primary gatekeepers of higher education, professional employment, and global knowledge production.

These findings support broader theoretical arguments regarding the role of linguistic capital and coloniality in shaping language policy outcomes. Colonial languages function as high-value linguistic capital because they provide access to prestigious educational institutions, international labour markets, and global academic networks (Bourdieu, 1991). As a result, political elites and middle-class families often support policies that maintain the dominance of these languages, even when research demonstrates the educational benefits of mother-tongue instruction.

At the same time, the persistence of colonial languages reflects deeper structures of coloniality, which continue to shape global hierarchies of knowledge and cultural legitimacy (Mignolo, 2011; Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2018). European languages retain privileged status within international academic publishing, scientific research, and technological innovation. Consequently, African policymakers may perceive the promotion of colonial languages as necessary for participation in global knowledge economies.

The challenge for contemporary language policy in Africa therefore lies in balancing the demands of global integration with the need to promote linguistic justice and educational inclusion. Multilingual policy models that strengthen literacy in African languages while supporting the acquisition of international languages offer one possible pathway forward. However, achieving this balance will require sustained institutional investment and a reconfiguration of the linguistic hierarchies that continue to shape educational systems and knowledge production across the continent.

DISCUSSION

The findings of this study indicate that the persistence of colonial languages within postcolonial African language policies cannot be adequately explained by technical or administrative factors alone.

Figure 2 below presents a conceptual model that situates language policy within a holistic framework linking historical power structures, institutional practices, and educational outcomes.

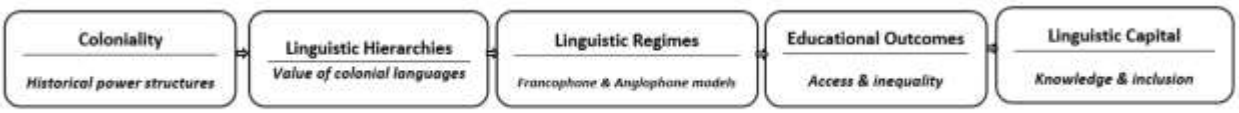

Figure 2. Theorising African language policy dynamics

The model begins with coloniality, which refers to the enduring historical structures of power established during colonial rule that continue to shape linguistic hierarchies in postcolonial societies (Quijano, 2007; Mignolo, 2011). These historical legacies influence the distribution of linguistic capital, whereby colonial languages such as English and French acquire greater social, economic, and symbolic value within educational and professional domains (Bourdieu, 1991). The interaction between coloniality and linguistic capital shapes national policy regimes, including Francophone administrative continuity, Anglophone global integration, and national language consolidation. These regimes, in turn, influence educational outcomes, particularly in relation to access, equity, and learning effectiveness. Ultimately, the framework highlights the importance of epistemic justice, emphasising the need for language policies that recognise diverse linguistic resources and support more inclusive systems of knowledge production and learning.

Although language policy documents frequently cite practical challenges, such as insufficient teacher training, shortages of learning materials, and limited institutional capacity, as barriers to the implementation of multilingual education, these explanations only partially account for the continued dominance of colonial languages in education and governance across the continent. A closer examination of international policy declarations, national language policy frameworks, and empirical studies reveals that language policy in postcolonial Africa operates within a complex nexus of historical legacies, political interests, and global regimes of linguistic legitimacy. In this context, colonial languages continue to function as powerful instruments of institutional authority, social mobility, and epistemological dominance.

Drawing on documentary evidence from international organisations, particularly UNESCO policy frameworks, as well as national case studies from Rwanda, Senegal, Tanzania, and South Africa, the discussion highlights how language policy remains deeply embedded in broader struggles over power, knowledge production, and socio-economic inequality. These cases demonstrate that language policy decisions are shaped not only by educational considerations but also by political priorities, economic pressures, and ideological assumptions about development and global participation.

Language policy as a political and ideological arena

One of the central insights emerging from the analysis is that language policy should be understood as a political and ideological arena rather than a neutral instrument of educational planning. Language policies reflect the interests, values, and priorities of dominant actors within particular sociopolitical contexts (Ricento, 2006; Tollefson, 2013). Decisions regarding official languages, the language of instruction in education, and the recognition of linguistic diversity are therefore closely intertwined with questions of governance, national identity, and socio-economic development.

International policy frameworks have increasingly emphasised the importance of multilingual education as a means of improving educational quality and promoting cultural diversity. UNESCO has played a particularly influential role in advocating for mother-tongue-based education. Its landmark report *The Use of Vernacular Languages in Education* (UNESCO, 1953) established an early foundation for the recognition of indigenous languages in formal schooling. More recent policy statements, including UNESCO's *If You Don't Understand, How Can You Learn? policy paper* (UNESCO, 2016), reaffirm the importance of teaching children in languages they understand during the early years of education. These declarations argue that multilingual education can enhance learning outcomes, improve literacy development, and support the preservation of linguistic and cultural diversity.

Despite these international commitments, national language policies often reflect competing political and economic considerations. Governments must balance the promotion of indigenous languages with the perceived advantages of colonial languages in global economic and diplomatic arenas. As a result, many African states have adopted language policies that formally recognise linguistic diversity while continuing to prioritise colonial languages in key institutional domains.

The persistence of colonial languages such as English and French illustrates the enduring influence of historical power structures established during the colonial period. European languages were institutionalised as the languages of administration, formal education, and economic exchange (Mazrui and Mazrui, 1998). Access to colonial language education became a key pathway to employment within colonial bureaucracies and later within postcolonial state institutions. Consequently, these languages acquired substantial symbolic and economic value, becoming associated with modernity, social mobility, and participation in global knowledge networks.

Postcolonial governments often retained colonial languages as official languages for pragmatic reasons, particularly in linguistically diverse societies where the adoption of a single indigenous language could generate political tensions. Bamgbose (2000) notes that many African leaders viewed colonial languages as neutral administrative tools that could facilitate national unity while avoiding ethnic favouritism. However, these decisions also reinforced existing linguistic hierarchies by linking institutional authority and socio-economic advancement to proficiency in colonial languages.

Coloniality and the persistence of linguistic hierarchies

The persistence of colonial languages in African education systems can be further understood through the concept of coloniality. Quijano (2000) conceptualises coloniality as the enduring system of power relations that emerged during colonial rule and continues to shape social hierarchies, cultural identities, and epistemological frameworks in the postcolonial world. Coloniality operates not only through political and economic structures but also through cultural and linguistic institutions that privilege European forms of knowledge and expression.

Language plays a central role in these processes because it mediates access to education, knowledge production, and social recognition. Colonial languages were historically positioned as the languages of scientific knowledge, administrative competence, and intellectual authority. Indigenous languages,

by contrast, were often marginalised as local or informal forms of communication that lacked the perceived capacity for modern intellectual discourse (Mignolo, 2011).

The cases of language policies in both Francophone and Anglophone countries in Africa, with references to Rwanda and Senegal, illustrate how colonial linguistic hierarchies remain embedded within national education systems. Even when policy reforms seek to promote multilingual education, colonial languages often retain their privileged status due to their association with global knowledge systems and international economic opportunities.

Linguistic capital and elite reproduction

Bourdieu's concept of linguistic capital provides further insight into the persistence of colonial languages within African language policies. According to Bourdieu (1991), languages acquire value within specific social markets, and individuals who possess the linguistic competencies valued in those markets gain access to economic resources, social prestige, and political influence.

In many African societies, colonial languages function as high-value linguistic capital because they are associated with professional employment, higher education, and international mobility. Educational institutions play a crucial role in reproducing this linguistic capital by rewarding proficiency in colonial languages through examinations, academic credentials, and employment opportunities.

The case of South Africa illustrates how linguistic capital intersects with broader patterns of social inequality. The country's constitution recognises eleven official languages and explicitly promotes multilingualism. However, English continues to dominate higher education, business, and government institutions (Probyn, 2024). While indigenous languages such as isiZulu, isiXhosa, and Sesotho are widely spoken, their presence in academic and professional contexts remains limited.

Research on South African universities has shown that students from rural or historically disadvantaged backgrounds often face challenges due to limited exposure to academic English prior to entering higher education (Heugh, 2011). As a result, linguistic inequalities can reinforce existing socio-economic disparities. Students who attended well-resourced urban schools where English instruction is stronger are more likely to succeed academically, while those educated in under-resourced rural schools may struggle to adapt to English-medium instruction.

Similar dynamics can be observed in Tanzania, where Kiswahili plays a central role in national identity and primary education. Tanzania's post-independence language policy promoted Kiswahili as a unifying national language and as the primary medium of instruction in primary schools (Brock-Utne, 2000). However, English remains the language of secondary and higher education. This transition often creates challenges for students who must suddenly shift from Kiswahili to English as the medium of academic instruction. Studies have shown that many Tanzanian students experience difficulties in mastering complex academic content due to limited proficiency in English (Heugh, 2011).

These examples highlight how language policy interacts with broader systems of social stratification. Colonial languages function as gatekeepers of academic success and professional advancement,

enabling those who possess high levels of linguistic capital to maintain their socio-economic advantages.

Global linguistic regimes and the politics of English

Another key factor shaping language policy in Africa is the growing dominance of English as a global lingua franca. Globalisation has significantly expanded the role of English in international commerce, science, technology, and diplomacy (Phillipson, 2009). As a result, many governments view English-language education as essential for national economic development and global competitiveness.

International policy frameworks often reinforce this perception. Development agencies and international organisations frequently emphasise the importance of English-language skills for participation in global knowledge economies. Consequently, African policymakers may face external pressures to prioritise English-language instruction even when domestic language policies formally support multilingualism.

The Rwandan case illustrates how global linguistic regimes influence national language policy decisions. While the policy aimed to enhance Rwanda's global competitiveness, it also highlighted the tensions between economic priorities and educational realities.

At the same time, it is important to recognise that promoting African languages does not necessarily require abandoning global languages. Research on multilingual education demonstrates that additive multilingual models where students develop literacy in their first language while gradually acquiring additional languages can support both cognitive development and second-language proficiency (Cummins, 2000; Heugh, 2011). Such models enable students to maintain strong foundations in their home languages while gaining access to international linguistic resources.

Implications for multilingual education reform

The findings of this study have important implications for efforts to reform language policy and promote multilingual education in Africa. First, they suggest that technical solutions alone are insufficient to address the structural challenges associated with language policy implementation. Investments in teacher training, curriculum development, and educational materials are essential, but they must be accompanied by broader institutional reforms that address the underlying power dynamics sustaining linguistic hierarchies.

Second, language policy reforms must expand the domains in which African languages are used. In many countries, indigenous languages are permitted only during the early years of primary education before students transition to colonial languages. This early-exit model often limits the development of advanced literacy skills in local languages and reinforces the perception that they are unsuitable for academic or professional contexts (Heugh, 2011).

Extending the use of African languages into secondary education, higher education, and public administration could help challenge these perceptions. For example, Tanzania's promotion of Kiswahili demonstrates how national languages can serve as powerful instruments of social integration

and cultural identity. However, similar efforts would require significant investment in terminology development, teacher training, and academic publishing in African languages.

Third, universities and research institutions have an important role to play in promoting epistemic justice. Supporting scholarship in African languages and recognising indigenous knowledge systems within academic curricula can contribute to more inclusive forms of knowledge production. Such initiatives would help address the epistemic inequalities that arise when colonial languages dominate intellectual discourse.

Toward decolonial futures in language policy

Ultimately, rethinking language policy in postcolonial Africa requires moving beyond technocratic models of language planning toward a broader vision of linguistic justice and epistemic decolonisation. Decolonial perspectives emphasise the need to challenge the historical hierarchies that continue to shape global knowledge systems and cultural recognition (Mignolo, 2011; Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2018).

Re-centring African languages within education systems represents a critical step in this broader project. Doing so can enhance educational inclusion, strengthen cultural identity, and expand democratic participation by enabling people to engage with public institutions in languages they understand.

However, achieving these goals will require confronting the structural forces that sustain linguistic hierarchies at both national and global levels. Addressing these challenges demands a comprehensive approach that combines educational reform, institutional transformation, and sustained political commitment to linguistic diversity and epistemic justice.

CONCLUSION

This study set out to examine why language policy reforms promoting African languages have struggled to achieve sustained institutionalisation across postcolonial African states despite decades of advocacy, policy commitments, and empirical evidence supporting the pedagogical benefits of mother-tongue education. Drawing on a decolonial analytical framework and employing critical policy analysis, the research sought to move beyond conventional explanations that attribute policy failure primarily to administrative inefficiency, resource limitations, or insufficient planning. Instead, the analysis explored how language policy functions as a site where historical legacies, political interests, and global linguistic hierarchies intersect.

The findings indicate that the continued dominance of colonial languages in African education systems cannot be understood solely as a practical or technical matter. Rather, it reflects deeply embedded structures of power that originate in colonial rule and continue to shape contemporary institutions, social hierarchies, and knowledge production systems. Colonial languages such as English, French, and Portuguese have retained privileged status because they function as powerful forms of linguistic capital associated with access to higher education, professional employment, and global economic networks (Bourdieu, 1991). These languages therefore remain central to systems of social mobility and elite reproduction within many African societies.

At the same time, the persistence of colonial languages is reinforced by global regimes of linguistic legitimacy. In an increasingly interconnected world, languages such as English have become dominant in international commerce, diplomacy, and academic publishing (Phillipson, 2009). Policymakers in many African countries view proficiency in these languages as essential for national competitiveness and integration into global markets. While such concerns are not unfounded, they often lead to policy choices that prioritise global linguistic capital at the expense of local linguistic inclusion.

The analysis further demonstrates that language policy operates within broader systems of coloniality that structure epistemic hierarchies and cultural recognition (Quijano, 2000; Mignolo, 2011). These hierarchies privilege Western knowledge systems and linguistic forms while marginalising indigenous languages and epistemologies. As a result, African languages are frequently confined to informal or cultural domains, while colonial languages dominate formal education, governance, and scientific knowledge production. This pattern contributes to forms of epistemic injustice in which the knowledge systems embedded within African languages are systematically undervalued or excluded from institutional recognition (Fricker, 2007).

Understanding language policy through the lens of coloniality therefore reveals that policy reforms promoting African languages face structural barriers that extend beyond the education sector. Even when policies formally recognise the importance of indigenous languages, their implementation is constrained by institutional practices, socio-economic incentives, and ideological assumptions that continue to privilege colonial languages. Consequently, language policy reforms often remain limited in scope, with African languages introduced primarily during the early years of primary education before being replaced by colonial languages at higher levels of schooling.

The persistence of this early-exit model of multilingual education has significant implications for educational equity and learning outcomes. Research consistently demonstrates that sustained mother-tongue instruction enhances literacy development, cognitive skills, and second-language acquisition (Cummins, 2000; Heugh, 2011). When learners are required to transition prematurely to unfamiliar languages of instruction, they often experience reduced comprehension and increased risk of academic disengagement. These challenges disproportionately affect students from rural and marginalised communities whose linguistic repertoires differ from those associated with urban elites.

Beyond its educational consequences, language policy also has broader implications for democratic participation and social inclusion. Language plays a central role in enabling citizens to engage with state institutions, access information, and participate in public debate. When governance and education are conducted primarily in languages that large segments of the population do not fully master, barriers to political participation and civic engagement are created. In this sense, language policy is closely connected to questions of democratic legitimacy and social justice.

Contributions

Theoretical contributions

This article contributes to the growing body of scholarship that seeks to reframe language policy debates within broader discussions of power, coloniality, and epistemic justice. While previous studies

have extensively documented the challenges associated with implementing multilingual education in Africa, much of this literature has focused on practical obstacles such as limited resources, insufficient teacher training, and curriculum development (Bamgbose, 2000; Trudell and Piper, 2014; Trudell, 2016). Although these factors are important, they do not fully explain the persistence of colonial languages across education systems.

By adopting a decolonial analytical framework, the study highlights the structural forces that sustain linguistic hierarchies in postcolonial societies. Integrating insights from the concepts of coloniality of power (Quijano, 2000), linguistic capital (Bourdieu, 1991), and epistemic justice (Fricker, 2007) enables a more comprehensive understanding of language policy as a field shaped by historical legacies and contemporary power relations. This approach shifts the analytical focus from policy implementation challenges to the broader political economy of language.

In doing so, the study also contributes to debates within critical language policy scholarship by emphasising the importance of examining language policy within global systems of knowledge production and economic exchange. The dominance of colonial languages in Africa cannot be understood without considering the influence of global linguistic regimes and the role of international institutions in shaping educational priorities. Recognising these dynamics is essential for developing more effective and equitable language policies.

Policy and practical contributions

The study also offers several practical implications for language policy reform. First, it suggests that meaningful change requires moving beyond symbolic recognition of African languages toward their sustained institutionalisation across multiple domains of public life. Policies that introduce indigenous languages only during the early years of schooling are unlikely to transform entrenched linguistic hierarchies. Instead, African languages must be expanded into secondary and higher education, public administration, and academic research.

Second, language policy reform should adopt additive multilingual approaches that support the development of strong literacy skills in learners' first languages while also enabling the acquisition of international languages (Williams, 2016). Rather than framing African languages and global languages as mutually exclusive, policymakers should recognise that multilingual competence can serve both local and global needs. Educational models that integrate multiple languages can enhance learning outcomes while preserving linguistic diversity.

Third, universities and research institutions have a crucial role to play in promoting epistemic justice by supporting scholarship conducted in African languages and developing academic terminology within those languages. The production of knowledge in African languages is essential for challenging the perception that intellectual discourse must occur primarily in colonial languages. Encouraging multilingual academic publishing and translation initiatives could contribute to expanding the intellectual domains in which African languages are used.

Finally, language policy reform must involve broader societal engagement. Language choices are often politically sensitive and closely connected to issues of identity, national unity, and economic

opportunity. Policymakers should therefore engage educators, communities, and civil society organisations in dialogue about the long-term benefits of multilingual education and linguistic inclusion.

Future research directions

While this study provides important insights into the structural dynamics shaping language policy in postcolonial Africa, several areas warrant further research. Future studies could examine specific national contexts in greater detail in order to explore how language policies interact with local political, cultural, and economic conditions. Comparative case studies of countries that have successfully implemented multilingual education reforms could also provide valuable lessons for policymakers.

Another promising area of research involves examining the role of higher education institutions in transforming linguistic hierarchies. Universities are central sites of knowledge production and have significant influence over the languages used in academic discourse. Investigating initiatives that promote multilingual scholarship and translation could shed light on pathways toward greater epistemic inclusion.

Additionally, research on language policy should increasingly consider the impact of digital technologies and new media on linguistic practices. Digital platforms provide new opportunities for the dissemination of knowledge in diverse languages and may contribute to expanding the visibility and legitimacy of African languages in public discourse.

Final reflections

Rethinking language policy in postcolonial Africa ultimately requires confronting the enduring legacies of colonialism that continue to shape linguistic hierarchies and knowledge systems. Language is not merely a tool of communication; it is also a medium through which power, identity, and knowledge are negotiated. The marginalisation of African languages within education and governance therefore represents not only a pedagogical challenge but also a broader issue of social and epistemic justice.

Re-centering African languages within education systems is essential for building more inclusive, equitable, and culturally sustainable societies. Such transformation would contribute not only to improved educational outcomes but also to strengthening democratic participation, preserving linguistic diversity, and enabling more pluralistic forms of knowledge production.

As this study has argued, achieving these goals requires moving beyond technocratic models of language planning toward a more transformative vision of language policy grounded in decolonial perspectives and linguistic justice. Only by addressing the structural forces that sustain linguistic hierarchies can postcolonial societies fully realise the potential of their rich linguistic resources and move toward more equitable futures.

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