Journal of Contemporary Issues in Education

# The “Elephant in the Room”: Why and How Medium of Instruction and Decolonisation of Education are Linked

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Volume 17, numéro 2, 2022

Special Issue: Towards a SoTL Embracing Critical Southern Paradigms and Frameworks in Higher Education: Curriculum Innovations, Flexible Pedagogies, and Teaching and Learning Support Technologies from a Global South

URI : https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1095281ar
DOI : https://doi.org/10.20355/jcie29496

Aller au sommaire du numéro

Éditeur(s)

University of Alberta

ISSN

1718-4770 (numérique)

Découvrir la revue

Citer cet article

van Pinxteren, B. (2022). The “Elephant in the Room”: Why and How Medium of Instruction and Decolonisation of Education are Linked. *Journal of Contemporary Issues in Education*, *17*(2), 79–91. https://doi.org/10.20355/jcie29496

Résumé de l'article

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# The "Elephant in the Room": Why and How Medium of Instruction and Decolonisation of Education are Linked

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## Abstract

The content of education and the medium in which it is delivered are generally seen as two different things: a curriculum that is in need of being "decolonised" can still be delivered in a colonial language. Likewise, a curriculum that is colonial in nature could in theory be delivered in any medium of instruction. This article argues that, seen from a macro perspective, this belief is incorrect. In African settings (and probably elsewhere as well), the medium of instruction and the content of that instruction are intricately linked. Evolution towards a decolonial educational system has to include a change in the medium of instruction if it is to be successful.

## Introduction

The Africa Knows! Conference, which took place virtually from December 2020 to February 2021, had as its motto: "It is time to decolonise minds" (African Studies Centre Leiden, 2020). One large stream of this conference, with seven sessions, was devoted to decolonising knowledge. By contrast, tucked away in a different stream, the one on "regional and disciplinary specifics," there were only two sessions devoted to language issues. What this illustrates is that the issue of decolonisation of knowledge and the issue of language are usually not considered in the same breath; they are treated separately. This may in part be because interdisciplinarity is still something for the few, not for the many; most researchers are firmly attached to a specific academic (sub-)discipline. But in addition, this can be attributed to the fact that the (decolonial) content of a curriculum is seen as divorced from the medium of instruction in which it is being delivered. Thus, it is possible, for example, for Ndofirepi and Gwaravanda (2019) to write a monograph on decolonisation of universities without even once referring to the issue of language. As another example, a Netherlands-based "knowledge platform on inclusive development policies" manages to present policy options for educational reform in Africa without mentioning medium of instruction issues (Platform, 2020). Many more examples of this type could be given. Thus, the impression is easily created that a "decolonised" curriculum could be delivered in any medium of instruction. The reverse might also apply: any medium of instruction can become suited for delivering what would be a colonial type of education. The two issues are not linked; or if there is a link, it is at best a tenuous one.

This article presents the argument that this analysis is faulty. A sociological analysis will show that instead, the medium of instruction and the content of that instruction cannot be seen in isolation. The analysis that is needed to show this has to move beyond an analysis of curriculum content. It has to address wider issues, such as what the social function of education is and who it is aimed at.
To this end, the section on the function of education in society will use an approach that is inspired by Bourdieu's analysis of the *habitus* and *cultural capital* that educational systems represent. A similar perspective to the one on education, which looks at its societal function, is also possible for language.



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In order to come to grips with this, I will make use of the concepts of *discerned* and *designed* languages (van Pinxteren, 2022). This will be presented in the section on the function of language in society. With the help of the framework thus sketched out, the article then goes on to examine the current state of the debate and the stalemate in which it finds itself. Finally, a new analysis is presented, showing how decolonisation is inseparable from a gradual shift towards using African languages more in education. The last section presents some brief conclusions.

## The Function of Education in Society

Homi Bhabha (1984) has already pointed out how institutions that were created in the colonies mimicked those that were present in the home countries of the colonial powers. It is common knowledge that the first educational institutions that were set up in Africa were not in any way aimed at educating the masses; they were aimed at forming a small group of cadres, useful for assisting with missionary activities and for taking up clerical and related positions in the colonial administration (White, 1996; Charton, 2000). What is often forgotten is that this is not so different from the situation in colonising countries at that time.

In England and Wales around 1800, roughly 40 per cent of males and 60 per cent of females were illiterate (Lloyd, 2007). University education was available only to a very tiny portion of elite students. According to Barro and Jong-Wha (2015), the enrolment ratio in 1850 in advanced countries at the tertiary education level was 0.2 per cent of the school-age population. Enrolment at the primary level was 37.7 per cent (Barro & Jong-Wha, 2015, p. 16). These levels were much above the level of sub-Sahara Africa at the time, given by Barro and Jong-Wha as 1.5% for primary education; however, that does not change the basic point: at the time that education was being introduced in Africa, it was an imperfect and adapted mimicry of an education system that, also in the Global North, was aimed at keeping workers in their place. It was highly selective and provided tertiary education to only a small minority of the population.

However, the second half of the nineteenth and the first half of the twentieth century were also a period of fierce social struggle in many countries of the Global North. Discussing this struggle falls outside the scope of this article, but what is clear is that this contributed to a great expansion in education. Barro and Jong-Wha (2015) give the enrolment in primary education in advanced countries in 1950 as 94.6 per cent. Enrolment in tertiary education stood at a still-low 4.7 per cent. The expansion of education also affected its very function in society.

What does that mean? A very rough indication can be found in the rule of thumb that has been developed by Trow (in Cloete & Maassen, 2015, p. 3). According to Trow, education that is accessible to less than 15 per cent of the population is elite education. Education accessible to between 15 and 40 per cent of the population is mass education. Education accessible to more than 40 per cent of the population is called universal education. This means that by and large, in advanced countries, primary education was for the "masses" in 1850 and had become universal a century later, in 1950. Throughout this period, however, tertiary education remained aimed at the elite.

What this means can be illustrated through the work and life of Bourdieu. Pierre Bourdieu was a French sociologist, born in 1930 into a family of modest means in the rural south of France. He was a bright youngster and was therefore allowed to enter the prestigious *École Normale Supérieure* (ENS) in



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Paris. There, he discovered that he was one of the few coming from a background of modest means; most students at the ENS came from well-to-do and well-connected families and had an urban rather than a rural background. This contributed to the analysis that Bourdieu and Passeron published much later in 1979. Following their analysis, education can be seen as a sorting machine, that selects students according to an *implicit* social classification and reproduces them according to an *explicit* academic classification. For Africa today, this analysis is very relevant: well-to-do parents can afford better education for their children, ranging from the pre-school level all the way to university. This means that it is far more likely that children from well-to-do parents get tertiary-level academic qualifications than other children. However, as analyzed by Naidoo (2004), the diploma culture hides this from sight; from the outside, it looks as if diplomas are awarded based on merit, rather than based on wealth. This system, though, does offer limited opportunities for a small minority of talented children from other backgrounds – thereby offering a system whereby the elite can reinvigorate and rejuvenate itself. In addition, this serves to legitimise the system, by creating the illusion that "anybody can make it."

In general, we can say that in Europe, both the *function* and the *content* of education have changed compared to the time when European education was used as a model for mimicking. This is a function of developments in the capitalist system, but it is just as much a result of class struggle and social strife that took place in Europe over the past century and a half.

How about Africa? In Africa, social strife was different from the patterns found in Europe. Still, social strife and struggle were there. If there is one thing that Africans were hoping to gain from independence, it was access to education. However, there are some important differences between Africa and Europe. Let me mention three that are relevant to this discussion.

In the first place, Africans, more than Europeans, have been brainwashed with the idea that *Western* education is the passport to economic success and modernity. The idea that education is also and perhaps primarily important for anybody to make a decent living and to participate as citizens in their societies was never as strong in Africa as it became in Europe. Socialist movements in the North have always fought for education not as a way of allowing workers to reach elite status but as a way of uplifting the masses and of creating a working-class able to stand up for itself in a capitalist society.

Tied to this is the deeply-ingrained idea in Africa that education is only worth its salt if it leads to foreign-language knowledge. What is more (and worse), there is a deeply-ingrained idea that foreign language knowledge is most easily attained by using that foreign language as a medium of instruction from as early an age as possible. Many scientists (Wolff, 2016; Heugh, 2011) have long ago concluded that this idea is false. As Cummins (1979) has argued, a firm grounding in a language close to what children already know helps to attain a higher level of foreign-language knowledge at a lower cost later during education. These insights have not gained wide acceptance yet in Africa, leading to a perpetuation of the current wasteful medium of instruction models on the continent.

Thirdly, and partly as a result of the above two factors, this means that the basics of the educational system in sub-Saharan Africa have remained unchanged since colonial times. The numbers have increased, but the basic setup has not. In the words of Cloete and Maassen (2015), in Africa today "there are only overcrowded elite systems" (p. 6). However, at some point, the expansion of education is going to reach a point where systems cannot stretch any further: they will have to change. I will



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return to this point further down in this article. Before that, we should examine the issue of languages and their function in society.

## The Function of Language in Society

Before being able to discuss the function of languages in society, two preliminary points need to be made first: one on how languages are *counted* and the other on how languages are *used*.

One of the most common statements one can read on language in Africa is that there are over 2,000 living languages spoken on the continent. The *Ethnologue* (Eberhard et al., 2022) currently puts the number at 2,154 for Africa and at 2,314 for Asia. By contrast, the number given for Europe is only 289, a number that seems meagre by comparison. However, the number of languages seen as "institutional" (used by institutions beyond the home and the community) is given as only 198 for Africa (nine per cent), as 193 (eight per cent) for Asia, but as 73 for Europe (twenty-five per cent). One factor that explains this difference is of course related to the fact that Europe was the colonising power. But there is another, more deep-seated explanation: the criteria for deciding what is and what is not a "language" have themselves been set originally by Northern (American and European) linguists and are and remain open to interpretation, as argued among others by Rajagopalan (2010). This means that a language like Oromo can be counted as four languages, but a language like English, despite its many varieties, is counted as one.[1] Authors such as Prah (2012) have seriously criticised this way of counting languages and claim that the actual number of different languages in Africa must be far lower than what the *Ethnologue* states.

The other issue has to do with how languages are used. In the literature, the focus is very often on language *as spoken*. However, in today's world, languages are not only spoken: they are also listened to, written, and read. This is where a more politico-social analysis comes in: *which* languages are used in other than the spoken form, why, and in which domains is contested in any society and is a function of existing and evolving power relationships in society.

One way of understanding this is by making use of the distinction proposed by Chebanne and Van Pinxteren (2021, p. 391) between *discerned* and *designed* languages. They argue that languages can be standardised or intellectualised (designed) in such a way that they serve speakers of several related (discerned) languages. But such *designed* languages can also be used for other purposes, for example for fostering elite education.

One example may serve to illustrate the mechanisms that are at play here. Leiden University in the Netherlands was founded in 1575, and it clearly served as an institution of elite education. In its first century, students "were less interested in professional training than in undergoing a kind of initiation into a cultural elite" (Otterspeer, 2008, p. 84). At that time, Latin was the medium of instruction. The last native speaker of Latin perished in the ninth century, a full 700 years before Leiden University took it up as a medium of instruction. Therefore, Latin was preserved through writing. It is impossible to say with certainty what spoken Latin sounded like. Even in Roman times, "Classical Latin" was a stylized

[1] For more information, consult for example the Electronic World Atlas of Varieties of English, https://ewave-atlas.org/, accessed 26 December 2021.



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form of the language, distinct from the spoken "Vulgar Latin" (Herman, 2000). The form of Latin used at the university was therefore a *designed* form of Latin, derived from interpretations of what classical Latin may have sounded like. This Latin had to be learned in secondary schools: the *Latin schools* that were prevalent in the Netherlands at the time, aimed at a minority of children from affluent parents. Latin continued to be used as the medium of instruction until the middle of the nineteenth century. According to Otterspeer (2008):

> In the first half of the nineteenth century, lectures were still conducted in Latin, even though most students had difficulty following what was said. To ease matters, the professors frequently resorted to dictation. Not until the 1860s, when faltering dictations in Latin were superseded by a freer delivery in the vernacular, did things begin to improve. (p. 145)

Even though university education in the Netherlands in 1850 still was very much restricted to elite education, the educational system in the country at that time was unable to give enough students foundational knowledge in Latin. Faced with the need to nevertheless remain effective in teaching, professors were forced to change from Latin to the "vernacular"; i.e., the medium of instruction changed from (an interpretation of classical) Latin to Dutch.[2]

But what is Dutch? Currently, the *Ethnologue* database discerns eleven Dutch-like languages spoken in the Netherlands (Eberhard et al., 2022). However, these eleven languages are not all used as a medium of instruction in the country; instead, a standardised version of Dutch has been developed and introduced, as described by Rutten (2019). This development of a standardised language has been analysed in relation to the emergence of the European nation-state and thus criticized as being homogenising – even though the emergence of standard Dutch did not lead to the extinction of other spoken Dutch-like languages.[3] What can certainly be said is that the use of standard Dutch was also a practical measure that made learning at higher levels more easily accessible to many students than the previous policy of providing instruction in Latin. This is because, for speakers of any Dutch-like language, standard Dutch is much easier to learn than Latin would be.

Prah (2012) has used the analogy with European languages to question the traditional way of discerning languages; instead, he maintains that the actual number of languages in Africa is far lower than the often-quoted number of 2,000 and that in Africa, like in Europe, higher learning could be made accessible to most Africans in a far more limited number of languages. As Chebanne and Van Pinxteren (2021) demonstrate for Botswana, this could also help to bring practical solutions closer for African countries.

In North Africa, a development away from colonial languages and towards the use of a standard language that is easier to learn is now visible. In colonial times, standard French[4] was used as the medium of instruction in Algeria, Morocco, and Tunisia. However, a gradual change is visible, whereby Modern Standard Arabic is being introduced as the medium of instruction, in some cases alongside French and in other cases instead of French. Yet the *Ethnologue* discerns six Arab-like languages spoken in Algeria, Morocco, and Tunisia (Eberhard et al., 2022). Like in the example given for the Netherlands above, these languages are not used in education; instead, the *designed* Modern

[2] To this day, Leiden PhD certificates are written in Latin.
[3] The 25th edition of the Ethnologue (Eberhard et al., 2022) gives a number of 5,000 speakers for the smallest of these languages, Stellingwerfs.
[4] The *Ethnologue* discerns five French-like language currently spoken in France: https://www-ethnologue-com/country/FR/languages accessed 27 December 2021.



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Standard Arabic is being used. Like in the Netherlands, this makes sense, because Modern Standard Arabic, even though it has to be learned, takes a lot less effort to learn (and to teach) for youngsters who already speak one or more of those six Arab-like languages than learning or teaching standard French to a high enough level.

African countries are usually characterized as *diglossic*. This refers to a situation where one language (the former colonial language) is the official language and enjoys much higher status than the Indigenous languages still also spoken in the country. As the example from the Netherlands shows, this diglossic situation is not entirely unique in the world. However, the scale and persistence of diglossia in Africa is. Its function can be understood borrowing Mamdani's (1996) terms: language serves as a selection mechanism that allows a certain part of the population access to participation in administration and public debate in a country, allowing that part of the population to act as "citizens." The rest of the population is effectively excluded from this. As in colonial times, they remain essentially "subjects." From a philosophical point of view, such a dichotomy is incompatible with a decolonial perspective. However, this dichotomy can persist without questioning as long as it is possible to maintain the illusion that in principle, everybody could learn (or be taught) such a foreign language. One could hold that even though not everybody can participate as citizens today, this will change with the expansion of education. However, this is an illusion. Before being able to understand that, though, we first need to examine the current state of the debate a bit more closely.

## Language and Education: The State of the Debate

Several authors – both African and from outside of the continent – have, over the years, argued in favour of a shift towards the use of African languages as a medium of instruction. In this section, I will summarise the reasoning developed by a number of the most prominent of them.

A key visionary proponent of this line of reasoning is certainly Kwesi Kwaa Prah. In 1991, he already argued: "If African languages are developed, to carry modern science and technology, transformation of the African earth would be rapidly advanced" (Prah, 1991, p. 61). This was written before the current prominence of the decolonization debate, but the reasoning is clear: Africa will be unable to achieve its needed transformation unless African languages are used. Based on this idea, Prah founded the Centre for Advanced Studies of African Societies (currently part of the University of the Western Cape) back in 1997. Language became a rallying point, allowing publications by many African intellectuals. Prah himself repeated and expanded on his ideas in his many publications, calling for example on Africans to "lay down the burden of English" (Prah, 2010, p. 141).

Another well-known proponent of this line of thinking is certainly Ngũgĩ Wa Thiong'o. His wording is different, but his message is similar: "only through the use of African languages shall we be able to break with European memory" (Wa Thiong'o, 2005, p. 164).

Recently, Ndlovu-Gatsheni has added his voice to the debate, building on the work of Wa Thiong'o. Thus, he has attacked

> the process of deliberate "stupidification" of African children, youth and even academics through consistent disciplining into abandonment of their mother tongues so as to use imperial and colonial languages of domination in their research, teaching, learning and even everyday conversations and communication. (Ndlovu-Gatsheni & Msila, 2021, p. 38)



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Many non-African authors have repeated the same line of reasoning, stressing various elements of the debate. These include for example Brock-Utne (2017), Roy-Campbell (2019), Skattum (2018), Skuttnab-Kangas (2013), Trudell (2016), and Wolff (2016).

Many other authors have presented similar arguments for their respective countries. Among the best-known are Bamgbose (2000) and Fafunwa (1989) for Nigeria, Chumbow (2005) for Cameroon, and Alexander (1998) for South Africa. As Kaschula and Nkomo (2019) have put it: the "language question is […] the 'elephant in the room' when it comes to development in Africa" (p. 619).

One strategy that can offer temporary solace to under-performing and over-expanded educational systems, currently much talked about, is the strategy of what is called *translanguaging*. Translanguaging means different things to different people, but in general, it involves allowing students and teachers to make use of their full language repertoires for teaching and learning. Typically, though, it does not involve a change in the language of examination: exams normally remain in the former colonial language. It is easy to see how, in certain situations, translanguaging might help (Makalela, 2015). This is of course especially the case when the language repertoire(s) of students and teachers overlap; in situations where students and teachers speak very different languages, a translanguaging practice might be dependent on the accidental availability of volunteer translators in a class. Where those are absent as well, translanguaging will not work. In addition, in situations where the former colonial language remains very dominant, translanguaging might actually be an early indicator of intergenerational language loss, because it only serves to ease a transition from using an Indigenous language to using only the former colonial language (for a discussion from Cameroon, see Ndzotom Mbakop & Kamgang Ndada, 2021; for a more general critique, see Wolff, 2018).

Supporters of these arguments are largely divided into two camps: there are those that feel *all* of the more than 2000 languages currently spoken in Africa should be treated in the same way. These people are generally influenced by the Pennycook school of thought, which objects to seeing languages as "bounded entities" (Pennycook, 2010, p. 131). Examples of this line of thinking can be found in Kembo-Sure (2002) or in Ndhlovu (2015). This approach has been criticized as what De Swaan (2001) has called "linguistic sentimentalism." The desire to preserve and protect each and every individual language in practice only leads, in the analysis of De Swaan, to increased dominance of English and other international languages. For a critical discussion, see also Wolff (2018) and Van Pinxteren (2022, p. 54). The other position maintains that it would be possible to work with a much more limited set of languages (Prah, 2012; Brock-Utne, 2017). This position is clearly the more practical of the two, even though it does not solve the problem of which languages should be chosen and why. For a discussion that tries to address these problems in the case of Botswana, see Chebanne and Van Pinxteren (2021). There is another, more important reason why this position is relevant, which is related to the analysis of Vansina (1992). Vansina holds that the old cultural traditions in Africa were largely destroyed in colonial times. He predicts the emergence of "neo-African" cultural traditions, based in African languages. These will of necessity be different from those of the precolonial past. Rigidly holding on to linguistic and cultural differences that may have had some relevance in times past will only obstruct the emergence of a new Africa, with its own, new cultural traditions.

The title of the volume edited by Prah (1998) encapsulates the dilemma expressed through these two positions. It is called *Between Distinction & Extinction*. Prah does not say it in so many words, but the



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title implies that the tendency to portray Africa as a "Tower of Babel" (p. 7), where thousands of different languages are spoken, divides Africans and leads to a continued dominant position for colonial languages that leads to the "arrest and relative retrogression" (p. 3) of African languages. However, this entire debate so far has remained one that has largely been restricted to linguists and a few thinkers on decolonisation. It has not entered the mainstream of debates on educational and language policy. The one exception may be South Africa, where academic circles inspired by the Research Chair on the Intellectualisation of African Languages have done serious work to try to think through what it would take to use African languages as a medium of instruction in higher education. As argued by Alexander (2012), even in South Africa the dominance of English as the medium of instruction is increasing, rather than decreasing. Posel et al. (2020) report "a dramatic increase in the share of Africans who reported speaking English as a second home language – from 3.3 percent in 1996 to 27.3 percent in 2011" (p. 777). However, they see no indications of African languages declining in the country. So, where is this debate going? To bring it a step forward, an additional line of reasoning is needed. This line of reasoning can be found by taking a closer look at the link between the medium of instruction and the function of education in society.

## Language and Education: A New Analysis

What we see is that all pleas for increased use of African languages seem to have fallen on deaf ears. Why? Clayton (1998) has given a useful analysis of the state of the debate at that time. It does not seem to have moved on significantly after he wrote his analysis. He summarizes the explanations that are given for the failure to use African languages in education into two categories. The first of these are explanations linked to the world economic system and the role local elites play in that system. These explanations point to the role of the former colonial powers, who want to keep their influence. They also point to the role language plays in maintaining the privileged position of local elites ("elite closure"). The second category is made up of explanations related to the functions languages have for national development and integration. These hold that using former colonial languages is more affordable, is advantageous for international communication, and helps build national unity (or prevents national disintegration). There is no denying that these factors all play a role. However, what they have in common – and what forms their major deficiency – is that they all paint a picture of Africa as *static* and *unchanging*. If these explanations sufficiently explain the situation, then there is little hope of it ever changing: the international system is set in its ways and the nation-state model is here to stay – there is little scope here for African agency. Decolonial theorists and educationalists can scream all they want, but their voices are doomed to remain marginal. However, we want to move beyond this and look for a decolonial approach that highlights the possibilities for African agency and stresses the possibilities for change. Therefore, it is necessary to extend our analysis and look for other explanatory factors. Such an explanation can be found by reverting to one of the basic ideas of Marxist thought: the idea that, at least to a certain extent, the (economic) basis of society determines what happens in the superstructure. What does that mean for education and for the medium of instruction?

The historical example given above from Leiden in the Netherlands gives a clue: if participation in education increases and the investment in education does not, then sooner or later, a change will be needed from use of a foreign language to a medium of instruction that is as easy as possible to educate as many students as possible. In nineteenth-century Netherlands, the quality of secondary education could not keep up with the increase in participation in education. Therefore, the university at some



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point was forced to change from Classical Latin to Standard Dutch (both *designed* languages in the sense described above) as the medium of instruction.

Obviously, the point at which such a change has to be made is not an absolute given; it depends on factors such as the investment in education, the quality of teaching, teachers and teaching materials, the motivation of students, the strength of vested interests, etc. Chebanne and Van Pinxteren (2021, p. 394) have tried to look at what some of the best educational systems in the world have managed to achieve in this regard, assuming that even under the best of circumstances, Africa will not be able to do much better. They point to the example of Estonia, which manages to give 34 per cent of its young people a level in English that is good enough for taking tertiary education in that language. However, some form of tertiary education is actually provided to over 70 per cent of young Estonians. What this means is that Estonia provides most of its tertiary education in Estonian, not (only) because it wants to, but because it needs to. The authors compare this with Botswana, one of the countries in sub-Saharan Africa with a relatively high participation rate in education. Botswana manages to give a good enough level in English to 13 per cent of its young people – but it provides tertiary education to 25 per cent. The authors predict that Botswana will face increasing pressures to change over to using one or more Indigenous languages. Otherwise, their educational system will not be able to deliver needed results – in the same way as was the case for the Dutch educational system in the nineteenth century.

It is interesting to explore this a bit more. Estonia gained its independence from the former Soviet Union in 1991. Before independence, tertiary education in Estonia used Russian as the medium of instruction, even though Estonian and Russian are two very different languages. In 1990, according to UNESCO statistics, the participation rate in tertiary education in Estonia was just under 25 per cent, as compared to 55 per cent for the Russian Federation. In other words, at independence, Estonia was a peripheral region in the Soviet Union, whose Indigenous languages were not valued; the country was in many ways backwards. Thirty years later, by 2019, Estonia had almost reached the same level as the Russian Federation; it had reached 74 per cent participation in tertiary education, as compared to 86 per cent for the Russian Federation. The only way it could achieve this was by changing the medium of instruction from Russian to Estonian; it was the most efficient thing to do. What is important to keep in mind is that not many educational systems can do much better than Estonia in terms of foreign-language teaching. Because language abilities are not distributed equally over a population, there seems to be a natural limit to what educational systems designed for the masses ("for all") can achieve in terms of foreign-language teaching. Beyond that point, they will be forced to switch to easier (designed) languages as a medium of instruction.

It is important to look beyond tertiary education. Estonia (as well as other countries in the Global North) has a highly-educated population; even those that do not continue to tertiary education receive useful knowledge and skills in secondary and technical and vocational education and training (TVET), without which is it practically impossible to participate in today's society. Many of these people will also know *some* English (or another international language), but they probably will not have the level of proficiency needed to take tertiary education in that language. This is in contrast with many situations in Africa, where those children whose circumstances do not permit them to acquire enough proficiency in a colonial language hardly learn anything at all in school and have to learn what they need to know through the informal sector.



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There is a general conclusion that can be drawn from this and that is particularly relevant for Africa today. In general, a foreign medium of instruction in a given country can be seen as an expression of the fact that education in that country is limited to the elite. An evolution towards education for the masses will of necessity be accompanied by an evolution towards an Indigenous medium of instruction. A decolonial theory of education will therefore have to engage itself with the issue of medium of instruction as well – at a general level, the two cannot be separated.

A gradual shift to using African languages more does not mean that the former colonial languages will go away. As overall enrolment increases, these languages taught as subjects will remain the second language of an increasing number of students. In addition, in some countries, former colonial languages have been appropriated by certain sections of the population, leading to varieties such as Ghanaian English and Ghanaian Pidgin English. These varieties are likely to stay in use as speech forms. In those countries where these forms of language are not dominant[5], their evolution towards more intellectualized or *designed* varieties seems less likely because the former colonial languages will remain more useful for those purposes.

## Conclusions

In this article, I have examined the current state of the debate on the use of African languages as a medium of instruction at all levels. Using statistical data and historical examples from the Netherlands and other countries, I have demonstrated how the use of foreign languages as a medium of instruction has not been restricted to Africa alone. It is, or was, in general, a hallmark of elite education. However, as education systems expand, partly because of social strife and the increasing demand for education, they will become more mass-oriented. This will make elite education using a difficult to learn foreign language more and more expensive and time-consuming. To keep mass education affordable and to bring it within reach of the masses, it will become necessary to switch to languages that are easy to learn for larger sections of the population. I have sided with the position that it will not be necessary to use *all* discerned languages for that purpose; like in other parts of the world, in Africa as well it will be possible to use a more limited set of easy to learn languages. A development in this direction is hampered in Africa by several deeply ingrained misconceptions, as well as by the still low participation level in education in Africa compared to other continents. “Education for All” implies an education that is suited to the needs of the masses, rather than to the needs of the elite. Therefore, “Education for All” has to be decolonial in nature. I have argued in this article that such a transition from colonial to mass education cannot be separated from a transition in the medium of instruction. This development is already visible in North Africa. How this change can be planned for and achieved remains an important and largely unexplored problem. Decolonial thinkers on education will have to engage themselves with this issue, moving the debate beyond decolonizing the curriculum alone.

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[5] Exceptions in Africa might include Cape Verde, where Kabuverdianu is dominant, and Sierra Leone, where Krio is widespread as a *lingua franca.*



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