

# Decolonial Language Education and Identity Realization in Africa

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*This paper explores the relationship between language education and identity realization and the consequences of choosing either an Indigenous or a colonial language education approach. The focus is on the African postcolonial context; however, the arguments are also substantiated by examples from other parts of the world. I argue for a decolonial-multilingual approach to language education, where our conceptualizations of language must be decolonized (freed from colonial rhetoric) so that language use can be explored for its utility. The paper juxtaposes two lines of arguments: the first is an insistence on a return to Indigenous language education as a form of decolonial resistance and warnings against intellectual control through colonial language education. The second line of argument explores the possibilities of compartmentalizing and interrogating language use as an alternative decolonial-multilingual reality, thereby redefining an individual's relationship with language and its influence on identity realization. As the paper highlights the extent to which language and identity are correlated, I conclude by stressing the need to decolonize language if identity realization is to be decolonized.*

## Introduction

This paper provides an analytical overview of how language education influences identity realization<sup>1</sup> by focusing on the African postcolonial context. The paper begins by setting an understanding of decolonization in relation to postcoloniality. This is followed by juxtaposing conceptions of identity with how identity is continuously shaped by language (education) as a dominant power structure. Next, the paper delves into the colonial roots of current medium of instruction (MOI) policies and how those subsequently shape identity realization. Issues raised by decolonial resistance to foreign or colonial language education are then discussed as a way of decolonizing identity. Finally, considering the complexities in establishing language education policies, a decolonial-multilingual reality is posited as a viable solution to the debate between colonial and Indigenous language education, with gaps in the discussed literature highlighted.

This paper contributes to comparative education research by arguing that language must be decolonized as a way of decolonizing language education and consequently decolonizing identity realization. For the purposes of this paper, decolonial approaches are understood as:

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<sup>1</sup> The term is understood as constant negotiations of an identity that neither ceases to transform nor to be influenced by macrocosms such as economy and society. The term is more fully contemplated in the following section.

The opening and the freedom from the thinking and the forms of living (economies-other, political theories-other), the cleansing of the coloniality of being and of knowledge; the de-linking from the spell of the rhetoric of modernity, from its imperial imaginary articulated in the rhetoric of democracy. (Mignolo, 2011, p. 48)

Decoloniality can then be understood as a freedom from *being* through coloniality — where colonial rhetoric and logic no longer define nor grant permission for the existence and execution of relationships. Postcoloniality, as a prior and concurrent function of decoloniality (and again for the purposes of this paper) is the awareness of the past and continued effects of colonialism. The dynamic between those two theories is replicated in the fluidity of thinking about language education, (post) colonial identity, and decolonizing language while realizing that the decolonial is the necessary progression of the postcolonial. The existence of one does not conflict with the other: the awareness of coloniality needs to be present to strive to be free from it – to achieve decolonization. Decolonization does not mean *forgetting* colonization ever happened (ceasing awareness of the past). It is the freedom from its effects.

### **Identity is Not Singular**

The relationship between languages used and taught in educational systems and identity ‘formation’ is similarly complex (although not as straightforward) and is wrapped up in de/post/neo-colonization efforts. Government and educational policies have an overpowering role in how identities – and by extension – societies are formed. As Leeman (2015) states, “identities are not fixed within the individual but instead are shaped and constrained by the macro- and micro-level sociohistorical contexts, including societal ideologies, power relations, and institutional policies” (p. 102). Leeman’s views on identity are congruent with Bourdieu’s views on language, where language is “an instrument of power and action” and “a form of domination” (Schubert, 2014, p.179). Therefore, dominant power structures utilize and shape identity and language in varying socio-historical, educational, and political contexts to create particular realities beyond one’s own capacity for self-determination. Individuals themselves shift between multiple, changing identities; therefore, the conceptualization of identity as being *formed* is in itself questionable, as ‘formation’ denotes a process of becoming, of solidification. It ignores what can be inherent to identity, the idea that identity can be predetermined, and that it is in continuous reformation and negotiation with itself. Identity, like language, is neither stagnant nor fixed; it is highly malleable and in a process of constant change. That is why I prefer to use the term identity *realization* (as opposed to identity *formation*, for example)—to highlight the constant transformability of identity rather than viewing identity as having a fixed and decided nature.

If we adopt Bonny Norton’s (1997) theory of identity as “the desire for recognition, the desire for affiliation, and the desire for security and safety” (p. 410), we can begin to understand how and why language choices are made in relation to shifting identities, and how individuals *desire* their identity to be perceived. This is especially the case when discussing language education in postcolonial contexts. For theorists such as Gandolfo (2009) and wa Thiong’o (1998), language denotes either Indigenous or colonial affiliation,

and the potential that a language has for security and safety is therefore assessed in light of colonial history and violence. Lanza and Svendsen (2007), Gandolfo (2009), and Mooney and Evans (2018) highlight how language became particularly significant to identity realization when the latter was threatened by political and social factors. Clots-Figueras and Masella (2013), in researching the effects of the 1983 educational reform in Spain where both Spanish and Catalan became the languages taught in schools in Catalonia (as opposed to formerly only Spanish), showcase how the introduction of bilingual education had extensive effects on political participation. Their work thus exemplifies the political consequences of linguistic self-determination through educational reform and highlights its potential beyond the individual. Language is thus far greater than a mere system of communication, it is an instrument in the broader orchestration of self and society.

### **Language Education and the African (Post) Colonial Identity**

The choice of language used as a medium of instruction (MOI) or taught as a subject in the postcolonial educational context is controversial, particularly as it relates to identity realization. Language education, especially in this context, serves a purpose: either to affiliate the citizen with their Indigenous roots and reclaim cultural and traditional knowledges or to provide education in a colonial/ 'global' language such as English or French with the promise of better global access and opportunity in the future. Some theorists such as Mazrui (1992; 1997) and Lunga (2004) argue against such a dichotomous approach to language education and propose a decolonial-multilingual reality as the best-suited option for the future of Africa. In this latter scenario, identity is not overtly shaped by language education; rather individual agency and self-determination serve to compartmentalize the function of each language in one's repertoire. The individual can then choose how language and language education shape their identity; from a decolonial point of view, the individual then reclaims linguistic agency.

In contradiction to this argument, Jahan and Hamid (2022) provide a comparative case study in Bangladesh where the medium of instruction (English/Bangla) strongly influences how others perceive someone's identity and social status. For example, students in Bangla-medium schools saw those in English-medium schools as "weaker, having less sexual prowess and vigor" (p. 60) due to their removal from (arduous and adventurous) rural Bangladeshi life by virtue of their wealth. The English-medium students considered their opponents incapable of affording high-quality mobile phones, an extension of their perceived lower social status. Hence, while an individual can have agency in the extent to which a language determines their identity, that language is part of wider political, social, and economic ideologies. As a speaker of that language, an individual often symbolizes and can be a proponent of those macro ideologies.

In a similar vein, LaDousa and Davis (2022) elaborate on how the MOI in educational settings in South Asia not only defines the classroom space but "extends into social and institutional life" (p.1):

People quite regularly describe themselves and others by the medium through which their education is being, or was, offered. ... For example, a

student might say, “I’m in an English-medium school, not a Tamil-medium one.” Through the rubric of medium, institutions and people are viewed as different from, or even the opposite of, one another. ... discussions of medium explicitly grapple with and offer critical stances toward the historically constructed, ever-changing ways in which languages, through their various connections to institutions, exhibit inequality. (pp.1-2)

This understanding of how language education can contribute to inequality and social injustice is not new, considering the history of colonial language education in (former) colonies. Jahan and Hamid (2022) explain that English education during colonial rule was “an embodiment of class, power, privilege, and mobility” (p. 46) and therefore, used as a means of social, economic, and political stratification. To ensure the effectiveness of this approach to language education, “the colonized [were socialized] to believe in the cultural and intellectual superiority of the colonizers through efforts to denigrate their own abilities and their cultures” (Bacchus, 2006, p. 261). wa Thiong’o (1998) describes how Indigenous Kenyan languages were “associated with negative qualities of backwardness, underdevelopment, humiliation, and punishment” (p.103), so that Kenyans who were educated in the colonial system experienced ‘colonial alienation,’ “a deliberate disassociation of the language of conceptualization, of thinking, of formal education, of mental development, from the language of daily interaction in the home and in the community” (p.103). Colonial alienation can then be understood as a force suppressing Indigenous or inherited identity realization.

Here, Bourdieu’s view of language as “an instrument of power and action” and “a form of domination” (Schubert, 2014, p.179) is exemplified: the regulation and selectivity<sup>2</sup> of language education during colonization was, therefore, a regulation of the identity of those who were colonized and their relationship with the local environment. To strip Indigenous people of their language and to vilify or denigrate Indigenous culture is to tarnish the *desire to affiliate* with it, as well as to tamper with that language or culture’s potential for *security and safety* (according to Norton’s (1997) theory of identity discussed above). Thus, the call for a return to Indigenous language learning by writers such as wa Thiong’o is resistance to colonial suppression of identity realization through language.

However, the attitude of vilifying local or Indigenous language education has persisted in many postcolonial countries, especially as political power after independence shifted into the hands of the elite who were educated in colonial languages (Bacchus, 2006; Gandolfo, 2009; Jahan and Hamid, 2022). As such, theorists such as Ezeanya-Esiobu (2019), Gandolfo (2009), and wa Thiong’o (1998) advocate for the necessary resurgence of African Indigenous language and knowledge education as a way of decolonizing African identity and reconfiguring the power that comes with language education. The aforementioned authors further stress that African Indigenous language and knowledge education extends beyond the individual by affirming connections to one’s history and environment and strengthening communal ties. Ezeanya-Esiobu (2019) also claims that the rampage on Indigenous languages and knowledges during colonization led not only

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<sup>2</sup> See Bacchus (2006), Lunga (2004), Sharkey (2008) and Seri-Hersch (2017)

to the postcolonial identity crisis and inferiority complex (also discussed by Fanon (1963)), but that it is a main cause for the current ‘underdevelopment’ in the region. Only when the African postcolonial identity is healed through a return to Indigenous language learning – therein regaining access to inherited identity and *inherited knowledge resources* – will those communities be able to realize endogenous development<sup>3</sup> and contribute something “specifically African” (Gandolfo, 2009, p. 333) to the world.

### **Problematics of Foreign or Colonial Language Education**

For Mazrui (1992; 1997), the danger for the postcolonial African in being educated only in a colonial or Western language is not only the divorce from Indigenous roots. The assimilation of aspects of Western culture as well as intellectual control by European languages further determine the African’s realization of their identity:

The process of acquiring a European language in Africa has tended to be overwhelmingly through a formal system of Western-style education. It is because of this that the concept of an African Marxist who is not also Westernized is for the time-being a socio-linguistic impossibility. (Mazrui, 1992, pp. 100-101)

For Mazrui, the method of language acquisition, through a “system of Western-style education”, has as much impact on one’s identity realization as the acquisition of the language. Therefore, *schooling* – similar to LaDousa’s and Davis’ (2022) and Jahan’s and Hamid’s (2022) claims mentioned earlier in this paper – not only influences one’s own identity realization but influences how one interacts in society and is perceived by other members of society. Consequently, the expansion of foreign-language education and a Western style of education can create tension and inequality in a society where language education systems are not standardized.

Mazrui (1997) further shares sentiments that foreign language education policies promote agendas of intellectual control: when intellectual self-determination can only be realized in a foreign language because of Western-style schooling, a genuine educational and intellectual revolution must necessarily include widespread use of African languages as MOI. Mazrui’s explanation of the compounded effects of language education – schooling, the language itself, and intellectual self-determination – showcases the extent of language education’s effects on the individual and society. This is why language education can be argued to be at the center of decolonization efforts: by freeing thinking and intellect from its colonial ties, one’s identity realization can ultimately be decolonized.

In line with Mazrui’s (1997) stance, Gandolfo (2009) explains: “What are presented as languages of development and modernity actually act to legitimize western interests and processes of globalization at the expense of these communities” (p. 332). This sentiment echoes strongly with Ezeanya-Esiobu’s and wa Thiong’o’s earlier viewpoints: the use of

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<sup>3</sup> The term ‘development’ on its own is problematic and raises many (neocolonial) connotations. The use of the term *endogenous development* here is purposeful. It is defined as “development coming from within communities” (Ndoye, 1997, p. 83).

African languages as the medium of instruction is a critical tool for the overall endogenous development and intellectual freedom of the region. By no means, then, is the medium of instruction limited solely to a classroom nor individual identity realization— the ideological potential of language education and its social, economic, and political consequences can serve to advance neocolonialism and decolonial forms of resistance.

### **A Decolonial-Multilingual Reality**

The above discussion has explored some tensions surrounding colonial language education in Africa. However, there can exist a more nuanced, fluid, decolonial, multilingual reality where language education's influence on identity realization is controlled by the individual. Mazrui (1992) also expands on his earlier statements cautioning against Westernization by arguing for a more balanced stance toward language education:

For Africa to attempt a strategy of withdrawal or total disengagement [from foreign languages/cultures] would be a counsel not only of despair but also of dangerous futility. Modernity is here to stay; the task is to decolonize it. World culture is evolving fast, the task is to save it from excessive Eurocentrism. (p. 109)

The key point that I would like to emphasize in Mazrui's statement is that modernity in all its forms is part of Africa's postcolonial reality and that disengaging from it puts Africans in more jeopardy than strategically engaging with it. Where wa Thiong'o warns against colonial alienation, the danger, in this case, is being alienated from modernity. To decolonize African identities means to decolonize language education policies and approaches, such that learning specific languages does not impose a sense of either superiority or inferiority, that it is possible to learn to speak English or French for its mere utility. The problematics of colonial languages persist; however, why and how they are learned and used should be subject to constant negotiation rather than rejecting them completely. The goal then is to decolonize language in general as much as it is to decolonize processes of identity realization through language education reform.

Spernes (2012) exemplifies this possibility and Mazrui's (1992) latter statement through a case study in Kenya, where schoolchildren are exposed to multiple languages: they speak their native Nandi at home and in the wider community, while English and Swahili are used and taught at school. Through observations, focus groups, and interviews, Spernes (2012) investigates whether the prohibition of Nandi at school influences students' identity realization. Spernes's findings are that students were acutely aware of the distinct functions of each of the three languages and were successful in compartmentalizing each. They referred to Nandi as "their mother tongue," "the heart language," "language used for storytelling," and "the language they mastered best." The students' attitude towards language learning reflected and reinforced local educational policies.

Spernes's (2012) findings suggest that students were aware of the importance of belonging to a global world (through English) and the importance of being able to connect with Kenyans from other tribes (through Swahili). Spernes (2012) therefore argues that students have "multiple linguistic identities" (p. 202). How then does wa Thiong'o's

viewpoint of colonial alienation configure in this context? According to Spernes, the students seemed confident in their distinction between the purposes of all three languages and there were no obvious negative consequences to not using or teaching Nandi at school. This is a realization of a balanced approach to language education, which does not culminate in overt Westernization of the African student's identity nor in their alienation from their mother tongue and culture. It is important to note, though, that Spernes's case study was limited to a snapshot in time of the students' (and their society's) development, and it is unclear how their socioeconomic status (the students interviewed lived in a rural area) affected their views on language, if at all. The long-term and widespread impact of such language education policies is also unclear; however, the necessity of such an approach is compounded by the fact that English and Swahili are Kenya's official languages. It would also be interesting to explore how those students' intellectualism has developed over the years – have they been able to decolonize intellectual self-determination by being multilingual?

In contrast, Osseo-Asare (2021) provides evidence that in Ghana, the prohibition of local languages at school resulted in high drop-out rates because students experienced a disassociation between their local environment, languages used in education, and their own identity realization. This supports Gandolfo's (2009) argument that access to education becomes limited for students who are forced to learn through instructional media other than the languages used at home and in their community. The issue then is not whether colonial or non-mother tongue languages such as English should be the MOI, as much as to what extent students are proficient in the MOI. Insisting on the use of foreign languages and consequently causing students to become alienated from their Indigenous languages and cultures and unable to understand school lessons is a clear impediment to educational, social, and individual progress. However, if students are able to realize a proficient, functional multilingual reality (similar to Spernes's (2012) case in Kenya), which does not impede their educational or social development, then there may indeed be substantial benefits to having non-mother tongue languages used in education as either MOI or taught as subjects.

Furthermore, Lunga (2004) raises the concept of hybridity to affirm a decolonial and multilingual reality where one language "interrupts" and "interrogates" another (p. 316). In this case, languages do not merely exist in one's repertoire side-by-side; instead, they constantly negotiate and redefine the other's existence, similar to the process of identity realization. Lunga calls for "a form of critical hybridity" (2004, p. 295) where postcolonial Africans constantly redefine their relationship with colonial and Indigenous languages, i.e., they move freely between those languages, creating multiple, fluid, non-contradictory identities. Thus, the schoolchildren mentioned in Spernes's case study would ideally grow to continually negotiate their usage of languages and form a critical awareness of how the languages impact their identity. This also aligns with Mazrui's cautions against "excessive Eurocentrism", while heeding Gandolfo, Ezeanya-Esiobu and wa Thiong'o's concerns regarding the inheritance of Indigenous language, culture, and identity. Lunga thus provides a succinct solution to language education in the postcolonial African context:

The postcolonial challenge is therefore neither how to recover pure languages and cultures from the past nor how to erase the trace of cultural and linguistic colonialism; rather it involves the ability to live within and against contradictions created by colonialism. (p. 325)

Lunga's (2004) statement reiterates the thoughts on decolonization and postcoloniality made in the introduction of this paper: "The ability to live within and against contradictions created by colonialism" is the awareness of the continued effects of past coloniality, i.e., postcolonialism. Simultaneously being able to *live within* and *against* its contradictions is the decolonial stance towards its effects. It is the freedom from its effects.

### **Conclusion**

The research discussed in this paper addresses the ever-changing, complex relationship between identity realization and language education, especially in the African postcolonial context where language has long been used as a tool for domination and subordination. A possible conclusion to this problem of language as a source of power- and to this paper- is not continuing to empower and subvert certain languages, but rather to strip languages completely of power in how we view them. The individual then emphasizes a language's utility instead of the ideological power it holds within a society so as to decolonize language. Multilingualism can then indicate multiple, shifting identities rather than multiplied power inherited from different languages. By decolonizing language and language education, the individual decolonizes their identity realization and relationship with language.

Future language education and identity research must therefore be conscious of the following: (a) the extent to which identity realization can be immune from language education; (b) the need for longitudinal research on how multilingualism affects shifts in identity realization over time; and (c) that theories and policies of language education extend beyond individual identity realization, with strong potential to decolonize societies and influence endogenous regional development.

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