# Introduction
## Transformative Power and Resourcefulness of African Languages in the Information and Knowledge Age

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### Preliminary Remarks

This book is conceived to provide insight into recent public discourse, academic research and related political activism and social community engagement concerning societal transformation in South Africa and its relevance for the rest of Africa. Therefore, to the exception of one of the editors and authors of this introduction who is, however, fairly well informed about the situation in South Africa, all contributors to this volume are of South African origin or current residence. We wish to present a kind of case study that is based on the South African experience, which provides an introduction and new insights for those who are not already familiar with the situation there, and which may also allow readers from other parts of Africa and the world to extract stimuli for intellectual and political debates in their own countries. However, this book cannot and shall not necessarily provide any blueprint for other countries and societies in Africa, or elsewhere in the Global South, on their way to mental decolonisation and towards evolving knowledge societies – because, and in particular when it comes to experience from Africa, no one size fits all, not even within Africa!

Post-apartheid South Africa assumes, at least on paper, a leading role on the African continent regarding the constitutional and enabling legal provisions for creating the necessary multilingual environments for postcolonial socio-cultural transformation. Within their civil society obligations, it remains a primordial task for academic researchers to monitor the design, implementation and shortcomings of policies and all related activities, not least to identify and provide 'good practice' examples for other African countries to study and, possibly, follow for their own purposes under their own conditions and provisions. Such examples are documented in this book.

In particular, local, national and sub-regional language ecologies need to be taken into account before premature generalisations can be made, be it on a continental or even a global scale. Obviously, it makes a difference whether there are autochthonous languages on the ground, which stand out by having millions of speakers, whether as first or second languages, and which may

already look back on histories of codification, standardisation and literary traditions, whether dating back hundreds of years – as in the case of, for instance, Geez and Amharic in Ethiopia and the *ajam* writing tradition in the Arabic script in parts of the western Sahel zone and East Africa – or just dating back to efforts by Christian missions in colonised territories at the beginning of the nineteenth or twentieth century. For many African languages, such process has not even begun or is severely lagging because of manifold structural issues including political and ideological constraints. South Africa mirrors this diversified situation by harbouring languages that reflect distinctly different stages of development or, as the editors and authors of this introduction prefer to say, comprehensive intellectualisation.[1] There is *English* as the most powerful and prestigious language with global reach and a long history of intellectualisation including literature production. There is *Afrikaans* (like Kiswahili) with a rather short yet exceptionally fast and effective history of intellectualisation including literature production, which by itself provides a 'best practice' case worth studying for effective language planning on all levels of intellectualisation. Besides, among the eleven official languages of post-apartheid South Africa, there are the nine 'indigenous' languages of Bantu linguistic stock (*isiNdebele, Northern Sotho (Sesotho sa Leboa), Southern Sotho (Sesotho), siSwati, Xitsonga, Setswana, Tshivenda, isiXhosa, isiZulu*), whose somewhat lagging intellectualisation history would appear to have started with missionary activities during the colonial period, though languages would have been used for intellectual purposes even before that, though not in written form. Further, not to forget, there are 'indigenous' languages beyond the eleven official languages recognised by the Constitution as such, which remain largely out of focus of intellectualisation efforts for little more than accidental historical reasons; this would also include *sign language*, which after much lobbying is set to become the twelfth official language in South Africa. These languages must be considered to remain disempowered. The characteristic *polyglossia* (or *extended diglossia*) situation

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[1] Note that, by the cover term *intellectualisation* in this volume, we refer to any form of 'language planning (status-, corpus-, acquisition-, opportunity-planning)', 'development' or 'modernisation' or 'elaboration' of disempowered languages towards their being made fit, so to speak, for uninhibited use in formal education across all cycles, scientific research and philosophical debate, in all public communication and media, whether print or electronic and digitalised, in order to place them on an equal footing with the so-called global languages (ILWC: *International Languages of Wider Communication*). In our understanding, intellectualisation begins at the 'alphabetisation' level of codification (graphisation, orthography creation) for hitherto unwritten languages and ends with effective 'post-alphabetisation' measures towards global visibility, presence and uninhibited use in all media and for all purposes, including the boosting of both monolingual as well as multilingual lexicography, and literature production, both for reading pleasure and all professional usages.

of the South African sociolinguistics thus reflects that of the rest of the continent as a kind of *Afrique en miniature*. As such, it should contain interesting and stimulating points of interpolation for other (African) countries as well.

Our approach to the issue is based on amply available empirical evidence for the overall failure of monolingual solutions and the benefit of institutionalised *mother-tongue-based multilingualism*, particularly in the Global South including, most of all, postcolonial Africa. This means that all efforts towards re-empowerment of African languages must be seen in the frame of combined endo- and exoglossic strategies, in which languages of global reach and non-African provenance must have their appropriate roles and functions, besides and in complementary functions with the African languages. This is particularly true for formal education in all its cycles, from kindergarten (preprimary) to university.

## Transformation and Mental Decolonisation

Africa's largely postcolonial societies are facing the need, among other things, of transforming into globally competitive knowledge societies. Such transformation must involve all society and must go hand in hand with the development of technologies resulting in the mass production and mass consumption of information. The idea is to empower people from all occupations and lifestyles, irrespective of ethnolinguistic and cultural background, with the necessary skills to become involved in the mass production of knowledge (see Chapter 10). This transformation would appear to be the only way for postcolonial African societies to achieve full mental decolonisation, that is, free themselves of continuing cultural and linguistic imperialism, which was and remains pervasive even after attaining formal independence from their former colonial masters (see Chapters 1 and 3). A key issue in this transformation process is education. Hitherto, the formal educational systems in place in postcolonial Africa have not achieved any substantial success in the direction of mental decolonisation, mainly because of the persistence of 'neocolonial' language policies. Such transformation of society poses tremendous challenges, not only political and ideological but also financial and technological, and for – in particular higher – education and the necessary provisions and applications of human language technology devices in the service of mass education and lifelong education as the Fourth Industrial Revolution (4IR) takes root. It must also provide the necessary facilities for the benefit of both academic research and its practical applications, and for knowledge production in general. These are the domains in which, generally speaking, Africa continues to sit lower on a global scale. One of the key factors in such transformation is language in a most general way, involving both 'indigenous' African languages and imported 'foreign' languages, and more specifically

the recognition of multilingualism, implying multiculturalism, as a *resource* rather than a *barrier* to sociocultural modernisation and economic progress. This puts the hitherto underrated role and functions of African languages to the forefront of all development discourse, as has been argued in Wolff (2016), on the basis of the 'language as resource' (Ruíz, 1984) paradigm that is currently dominating discourse in the emerging field of 'applied African sociolinguistics'. In particular, a new discussion must target the eminent role that indigenous languages have to play in (formal) education, alongside foreign languages of global reach, as part and parcel of so-called mother-tongue-based multilingual education models, as argued and illustrated, for instance, in Kaschula and Wolff (2016).

Postcolonial Africa is suffering from underperforming education systems and the slow process of transformation. The current situation is rooted in recent history, namely in uninformed copy-and-paste strategies regarding the choice of state ideology and education systems for the newly independent states in Africa. In terms of a state model, the ideological impact from colonial history still prevails in the formally independent countries and postcolonial societies in Africa, most of which have emerged out of former colonial territories of European powers. After the end of colonialism, the newly independent countries copied the situation that was found in the colonial motherland and followed the idealised model of 'nation state', which dates back to eighteenth- and nineteenth-century nationalist-romantic ideology of European provenance. Imposing the implicit monistic ideology of 'one state – one nation – one language' on what are, in essence, highly diverse and pluralistic societies, amounted to the imposition of a dramatically inappropriate state model on the newly independent countries.[2]

From an *a posteriori* perspective, African freedom fighters and politicians of the first post-independence generation could be found guilty of missing the historical chance of choosing to follow a 'multinational' or, as we here suggest, a 'trans-nation' state concept for the newly independent countries in the aftermath of the anti-colonial struggle. Such model, in our view, would have been better suited for shaping the emerging modern postcolonial societies.[3] The adoption of an inappropriate state ideology links up with the observation that, since independence more than half a century ago, African societies have made

[2] This would, of course, not apply to previously never-colonised, independent African states like Liberia and Ethiopia, even though English has acquired an increasingly hegemonic role in domains like higher education.

[3] It should, however, be admitted that existing European multinational states, who were never involved in African colonialism in the first place, failed to provide 'good practice' models for post-independence Africa, as a look at the fate of, for instance, the former Habsburg Monarchy, the ex-Soviet Union and ex-Yugoslavia shows.

only slow progress on the way to full 'mental decolonisation'. The reason for this is that the European nation-state ideology entails the imposition of one purportedly 'neutral' or 'unifying' language of power on what are, as a rule, multi-ethnic, multilingual and multicultural societies. It remains, however, highly doubtful whether there can at all be 'neutral' languages in terms of power and prestige in postcolonial scenarios of highly pluralistic ethnolinguistic make-up of polities, as we find them in Africa at the end of colonialism. What happened was that the newly imposed language of power dramatically reshaped the national communication landscape in terms of the attributes 'powerful and prestigious' versus 'powerless and irrelevant' regarding languages, with the effect of disempowering all African languages vis-à-vis the language of the former colonial master. This established and maintained a regime of linguistic and cultural imperialism, which is virulent until this day. Thereby, the medium of the ex-colonial language becomes intimately linked to upward social mobility as well as access to political power and national economic resources. It has an almost fatal effect on efficiency in the domains of national official communication and formal education, where the imposed foreign language is close to being dysfunctional in terms of reaching the majority of the population and serving as the medium of sustainable knowledge transfer and as the medium for enhancing societal modernisation. On the contrary, it is slowing down the development of civil societies and the emergence of sociocultural patterns that would foster democratic participation of all sectors of society. The fact that English, French and Portuguese are slowly but continuously gaining ground among increasing numbers of mainly urban dwellers in Africa must not veil the fact that these languages generally do not serve the purpose of enabling large-scale interethnic communication as widely favoured lingua francas, nor as effective or efficient media of instruction on any level of (formal) education, including universities. They remain 'exclusive' media to the detriment of the majority of African populations, establishing and maintaining a 'post-colonial class divide' (term introduced by Pierre Alexandre) based on restricted access to the official ex-colonial language of power, and thus create a regime of 'neo-apartheid' (term introduced by Neville Alexander 2005; 2013) in which first-language speakers of certain European languages benefit to the detriment of first-language speakers of other languages.

Mental decolonisation is a prerequisite to becoming both a receiving and a giving member of globalising knowledge societies as part of the so-called Global South, including the African postcolonies. Such societies would share the target of creating and maintaining genuine knowledge societies in their own rights, based on self-consciousness and pride grounded in their own cultural histories. This is also captured rhetorically in the term 'African Renaissance', which so far, however, has remained largely an empty shell used for lip service

in political window dressing and which has never been linked to the aspect of the essential role the African languages will have to play in a genuine African Renaissance. The idea behind mental decolonisation is to regain control over ways and means to improve the human condition on the ground of former colonial territories and do so largely independent of the hegemonic political, economic and cultural dominance of imported models, mostly of European origin and imposed by former European colonial powers. In this sense, knowledge societies in the Global South are adverse to any form of linguistic and cultural imperialism, in particular when it emanates from former colonial powers. On their way to become competitive knowledge societies in global terms, African postcolonial societies are currently undergoing transformative processes, which – in material and immaterial terms – need to amalgamate home-grown resources, often referred to under the notion of 'indigenous knowledge systems', including a plethora of diverse languages and cultures and embracing, for instance, genuine African philosophies like *Ubuntu*, with foreign resources, including powerful world languages, modern state ideologies, and capitalist economic systems. The hitherto heavy delay regarding this process of transformation in Africa has played, not by accident but by wilful intervention, into the hands of the global economic, political, and military powers, some of which were former colonial powers, in order to keep the Global South at bay, and most prominently so the African postcolonies. Such transformation rests, to a very high degree, on providing effective and efficient (formal) education for the so-called masses of the populations. Effective 'mass education' would be geared towards exploiting the intellectual and cognitive potentials of younger generations in order to create, on the one hand and most of all, individual competitiveness of school-leavers and university graduates, and on the other, socio-economic competitiveness of societies at large, and to achieve both on a global scale. A case in point and 'best practice' example would be that of South Korea, which in a short space of time has socially engineered a highly educated, industrialised, knowledge-producing and economically successful society, largely through the medium of their own language and on the basis of strong feelings of affirmative acknowledgement of their own political and cultural history and identity.[4]

African societies must become knowledge producing instead of remaining only knowledge consuming, the more so since the knowledge they consume comes from the 'North', wrapped in languages and cultural concepts that are foreign to most Africans. To this imported knowledge from the North,

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[4] It is worth noting that in South Korea the primordial role of the indigenous mother tongue of all Koreans has never been questioned. However, and in no apparent contradiction, modern sectors of South Korean society have become functionally multilingual, involving global languages such as English.

African societies, beyond a few members of the privileged oligarchy, tend to have no immediate access owing to perpetuated linguistic and cultural barriers. Colonial and postcolonial history in Africa has shown that, for education, 'copy-and-paste' strategies that rigidly follow the models of the former colonial masters, including monolingual teaching and learning in the 'language of power', show very dismal results. Such systems have fostered the emergence of a postcolonial class divide, in which 'elitist' minorities can afford and achieve, mainly through private or expatriate institutions, sufficient working knowledge of the imported language. This language, despite its being a foreign language for most if not all the citizens, has become the 'official language' of the country, priding itself on a respective constitutional status. There are, however, exceptions such as the growth of Kiswahili in a country like Tanzania. This can affect the status of the rest of the minority African languages. This, in sociolinguistic and activist terms, 'pervert' situation of primarily promoting exoglossic languages allows the elitist oligarchy to monopolise political and economic power to the detriment of the masses, who remain caught in precarious living conditions, not least due to under-education. The underperforming education systems currently in place in Africa are an immediate consequence of the perpetuation of the essentially unjust colonial education system, which in Africa amounts to linguistic imperialism.

In Africa, the colonial strategy for education was restrictive in two ways. First, it restricted official communication, including formal education, to the imported languages of power, namely those of the colonial masters. This language was foreign to everybody except the colonisers themselves. Second, it restricted access to formal education to a tiny minority of colonial servants, who were supposed to acquire the language of the colonial master well enough to act as go-between and to communicate the will of the colonial authorities to the masses of the colonised populations, for which purpose they were free to use semi- or non-standardised indigenous languages. This created the characteristic colonial and postcolonial 'polyglossia' situation, in which one language has high status on a prestige and power scale, while other languages sit low(er) on that scale. The difference of status rests on two sets of decisive factors:

 (i) The use of the language(s) in question by agents of colonial, later postcolonial, power in so-called higher domains, including government, legislation, jurisdiction, administration, formal education, etc.
(ii) The degree of standardisation and literary tradition of the language.

Obviously, the imported foreign language of the colonial master demands the highest rank on the polyglossia scale, being the language of power, usually with constitutional status as official language of the country, and looking back at a long history of standardisation and literature, which is rooted in their history back in Europe. The indigenous languages rank much lower on that scale

owing to official disempowerment under the colonial regime and, as a rule, lack of a long tradition of writing and literature. Among the notable exceptions in Africa, Ethiopia stands out as not having undergone formal colonialism (despite Italian attempts) and having to her credit an exceptional development of writing and literature since the fourth century CE. This exceptional history has resulted in the special case of an indigenous African language, namely Amharic, developing as an endoglossic language of power, again much to the detriment of other African languages in Ethiopia, which used to sit much lower on the national polyglossia scale, including a majoritarian language like Oromo, which remained largely unwritten. Elsewhere in former colonial territories, during the colonial regime and into decolonisation struggles, the class of former colonial servants as much as the – often exiled – independence fighters took over and settled for a non-African language of power as their own prime medium of expression, to no little extent fostered by their situation of being exiled from their country of origin. This allowed voicing their political agenda and to be heard in international politics, but again this happened at the expense of diminishing the status of the African languages in the former colonial territories, which appeared to play no role for achieving freedom from oppression and securing self-government and political independence. Although freedom songs were sung and anti-colonial speeches were occasionally delivered in African languages, the languages themselves remained marginalised and unrecognised. This degraded them even further on the (post)colonial polyglossia hierarchy scale.

The linguistically (but not so much culturally) assimilated minority of the emerging class of colonial servants as much as exiled independence fighters eventually turned into a self-declared postcolonial elite, taking over the colonial state by simply putting 'black faces in white places' (Neville Alexander, 2013), and taking over the language of the former colonial master as both a *symbol* and a *tool* of power. They developed the habit of copying the behaviour of their former colonial masters, to the extent that they also shared their prejudice against practically everything considered indigenous to Africa, including languages, as 'tribal', 'primitive' or 'ridiculous'. This attitude fostered the creation of the tongue-in-cheek critical label given to such members of postcolonial societies of being 'coconuts' – brown outside, but white inside. By continued access to quality education through the medium of the ex-colonial language for their own children, but at the same time creating a language barrier that would keep the masses away from quality education ('elite closure' is the descriptive term introduced by Carol Myers-Scotton, 1993), the new elite established and to this day represent a postcolonial class divide, in terms of what Neville Alexander (2005; 2013) refers to as a 'linguistic fault-line'. In many postcolonial states in Africa, an alienated elitist and foreign-language-speaking oligarchy controls access to power and national resources, while the impoverished masses suffer from dramatic

consequences of underdevelopment because of under-education, aggravated by mismanagement and corruption in public administration and services. The elite have purposefully installed and maintained a bottleneck strategy, which allows private and expatriate institutions to monopolise quality education through the ex-colonial language. The fees tend to be unsurmountable barriers for the non-privileged sections of society. This bottleneck strategy has a triple negative effect on any attempt to overcome underdevelopment in Africa:

(1) It blocks, first of all, access to quality education for the masses.
(2) It rules out, as a consequence, democratic participation of the masses in all major national political and economic matters.
(3) It, thereby, prevents the development of modern knowledge societies in Africa based on the intellectualisation of African mother tongues and lingua francas, since they remain underused, if not completely disregarded, in so-called higher domains.

Sociocultural transformation towards democratisation of information and knowledge through optimised education should, therefore, be high on the agenda of postcolonial societies, including South Africa, the country on which this book focuses. Serious efforts in this direction, with underpinning in academic research, have barely begun (for a continental overview, see Ouane & Glanz, 2010; 2011). Obviously, research in the humanities, communication sciences (particularly with regard to information and communication technology [ICT]) and in the social and economic sciences must pool efforts and resources to build a foundation for unrestricted information distribution and knowledge creation, making optimal use of modern digital technology under the new umbrella of *digital humanities*, and using the cognitive potentials of mother-tongue-based multilingual education, as we enter the 4IR and the emergence of artificial intelligence (AI) with all its potential technological linguistic opportunities. The aim is to transform current 'local and postcolonial' into 'global and knowledge' societies, which would be on a par with other global players, including the former colonial powers and newly emerging market societies anywhere on our planet, such as the BRICS countries (Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa). Implied in this endeavour is to generate knowledge that is based on widely shared information, that is, which becomes available to all members of society, independent of ethnic, cultural and linguistic backgrounds. This involves providing appropriate information and communication technology that would mirror the linguistically diverse background of users, that is, it would allow for a maximum of diverse input languages, with regard to both the World Wide Web and mobile devices, using the advantages of digitalisation. The strategies used would be 'pluralistic and inclusive' in nature rather than 'monistic and exclusive' as they were in the outdated colonial model. They would disallow 'neo-apartheid'

(Neville Alexander, 2013) to establish itself by maintaining unjust privileges for native speakers of chosen languages, which in South Africa would be English, but would leave speakers of languages other than English (LOTE) behind in a more or less precarious and disempowered situation. Such targeted pluralistic and inclusive transformation would appear to be the only strategy that allows opening pathways to upward social mobility for members of the hitherto disempowered masses of the populace by optimising education, training and employment facilities, that is, by providing life-sustaining resources for all members of society. Essentially, the desired transformation is based, first and foremost, on language.

Language has long been recognised as an important aspect of postcolonial modernisation of African societies, albeit being discussed in diametrically opposed directions. Experts who share an academic background in sociolinguistics (or education science) have mostly argued in favour of multilingual solutions in which African languages would have to assume an important role. In public discourse and in non-linguist academic circles, however, the dominance, if not exclusivity, of the ex-colonial official language of European provenance was taken for granted and considered an unchallengeable given.[5] Counterarguments taking issue with the generally rather limited spread and, where it was being used, rather poor proficiency in the exoglossic official language, particularly outside the capital city in the rural areas, were regularly met with the narrow-focused suggestion to simply increase exposure to the foreign language via education. The basic question whether at all monolinguistic exoglossic official language policies can serve the purpose in the African context was practically never raised. It is at this point that the current discussion and advocacy of mother-tongue-based multilingual language policies for Africa sets in (see Ouane & Glanz, 2010; Wolff, 2016).

Higher education, based on solid foundations in relevant academic research, must play a central role in the postcolonial transformation in Africa. It would have to develop and disseminate ways and means to access and create knowledge from what is available, also local information by learner-centred approaches, which would take into account the diverse linguistic and cultural backgrounds of the learners. Models for such transformative processes cannot be expected to derive from Europe or the North in general, where modern nation states remain more or less obsessed with the monistic 'Project Nation'

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[5] At variance with sub-Saharan Africa, for North Africa and Ethiopia the official languages of default, so to speak, were Arabic and Amharic respectively. These languages, however, can be considered as foreign to the Berberophone populations in North Africa and the about eighty ethnolinguistic groups in Ethiopia whose first language is not Amharic as English, French, Portuguese and Spanish were to practically all indigenous African populations in the former colonial territories of sub-Saharan Africa.