The Socio-Politics of Language in Post-Colonial Africa

Kira Allmann

In 1994, the apartheid state in South Africa ended, and a process of healing began, including a Truth and Reconciliation Commission that gave victims and perpetrators the opportunity to talk about violence and justice. The same year, a plane crash involving the president of Rwanda ignited years of tension and conflict into a blaze of violence and genocide in Rwanda. In Botswana, legislative elections were being held in Africa’s longest-standing multiparty democracy. Just two years earlier, a military coup deposed the president of Sierra Leone, in the midst of a civil war. Within the same five years, Africa experienced both heartening progress and bitter conflict. These opposing phenomena constantly interact on the continent, existing simultaneously in some cases and alternating in others. The components of conflict must be holistically addressed in post-conflict or transitional governance in order to prevent their resurgence, and this will prove pertinent for its future on the global stage. Rehabilitation can be as painful and complicated as the turmoil left behind, and truth commissions, public forums for the airing of conflict-related grievances, have shown this reality across the continent. Inherent in these processes of renewal, but also those of downward spiraling conflict, are issues of identity and interpersonal contact. Language is central to understanding these factors since it serves as a means of self-identifying, articulating grievances, perceiving external realities, interacting with diverse others, and defining expectations for uncertain futures.

Post-colonial Africa, emerging from a tumultuous past and pursuing the challenging goals of reconciliation and development, provides a crucial context in which to examine the ways in which language carries cultural history within its lexicon and through its emblematic role in society. Specifically, the language communities of Africa demonstrate the necessity of addressing language historiography in the establishment of complex concepts of justice, truth, and transparency in transitional states. Understanding the language in which Africans are socialized into political life explains political attitudes and perceptions in contemporary circumstances. Part I examines colonial influences in African languages and language policy, part II explores pidgins and creoles, and part III analyzes language and conflict; the essay concludes with a discussion of persistent questions for future investigation.

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Language permeates all levels of socio-political interactions; its use can both clearly send and tacitly carry embedded political messages about power relationships. In Africa, where the modes of political discourse are often in tenuous transition, recognizing the history of everyday speech is essential for sustained reconciliation. Two levels of analysis will prove most valuable in these scenarios: ideologies about language and its uses and ideologies entrenched within language and its uses. This distinction is particularly salient because the post-colonial world espouses a nationalist ideology of language—an association of language ownership with patriotic verve—and that ideology views language as a way to assert legitimacy, address multilingual environments, and define ethnic groupings.¹

The globalization of English, a colonizing language with contemporary international prestige, has given rise to a field of liberation linguistics defined as “forms of linguistic beliefs and practices that accent the sociopolitical dimensions of language variation” and “is rooted in contexts of social injustice.”² Where inequality and injustice are engrained in discourse or in the very lexical elements of local languages, it may prove difficult to overlay political institutions that purport to rectify such disparities. Furthermore, a lexicon that carries historical tensions or that disadvantages certain domestic actors may need remediation as the medium through which Africans discuss critical topics such as truth, justice, and reconciliation. The terms must develop distinctly African identities in a context where the language used to implement them may not be unadulterated by past atrocities.

Colonial Legacies and World Language

Almost every country in Africa bears the mark of colonialism.³ The process of European subjugation, invasion, and occupation required extensive political and linguistic influence and control.⁴ This included proactive teaching policies to impose the European tongue’s dominance, as was the case in Zaire under Belgian rule.⁵ In other cases, it involved the creation of new bridge-forms of communication, such as pidgins—contact languages—and lingua francas—non-native languages adopted for specific interactive purposes⁶—that served the needs of the colonial power in the realms of commerce and colonial administration.⁷

While colonial powers uprooted traditional, pre-colonial political systems in favor of direct or indirect rule,⁸ they simultaneously infiltrated the very core of identity and cultural knowledge by imposing the dominance of their languages. Colonial records of language distributions on the continent became the basis for assumptions about civility and ethnic inferiority,⁹ and those ideologies became engrained not only in the worldview but in domestic relations among linguistic communities that may not have previously defined themselves in those terms.¹⁰ Furthermore, the terminology imposed by colonial administration was often incongruous with traditional structures and created parallel political discourses, as evidenced by indirect rule in Uluguru, Tanzania.¹¹ Governor
Donald Cameron introduced political dialogue based on chieftaincy, which was perceived by the British administrators to be the universal social organizing principle. This became a sort of pidgin political discourse between the British administrators and the true social arrangements of the Luguru people, who understood politics in a language of kinship and initiation, not chiefdoms. This clashing terminology lacking cultural roots created several levels of governance: a secret traditional level in the familiar pre-colonial language, the indirect-rule chiefdoms that communicated in the traditional terms recognizable to the British, and the colonial administration that imbued its invented chiefdoms with negative ethnic connotations. The foreign occupiers effectively constructed cultural reality, and the terminology associated with it remains long after independence. This example demonstrates how politically motivated external actors delineated even the most basic cultural definitions. Thus, the traditional language in Tanzania incorporates political understandings that are not only foreign in origin but also carry derogatory historical associations.

Language policies in colonial Africa appeared in many renditions, from mandatory instruction in the colonizer’s mother tongue to the creation of lingua francas or pidgins to facilitate quick communication in specific interactive contexts. In all of these situations, however, colonization not only altered the institutions and economic composition of African societies but also left a far more insidious linguistic ghost—it helped to establish the terminology and semantic repertoire in which post-colonial Africans would need to converse.

Today, English has accomplished a kind of linguistic conquest of its own, the result of American political and economic prowess. It holds special status in the United Nations, the European Union, UNESCO, the World Health Organization, and the World Bank, and at the close of the 20th century, nearly one in four people in the world could speak English. English is the language in which we speak about development, and it has achieved a lasting colonialism that cannot be ignored. As a result, this language of colonial inheritance remains a permanent element of developing Africa, and although African dialects of English take on indigenous characteristics and significance, its identity-history cannot be entirely escaped in the new, positive, and conflict-sensitive language of prosperity. South Africa proves an interesting case.

In South Africa, the extensive foreign settlement that accompanied colonialism resulted in apartheid, and again the importance of language in domination becomes apparent. Cultural distinctions were factitiously drawn based on language use, and the languages of power were the languages of the white officeholders—English and Afrikaans. These divisions redefined ethnic and racial lines and made value judgments about indigenous languages that South Africans still struggle with today, since many local languages were used as justifications for apartheid and have been associated with inferiority or incivility. In the aftermath of apartheid, English remains a dominant language as a globalizing tongue. It is the language of choice for many Africans seeking an education and looking to be
competitive in the global marketplace. It is a language with a unique African history now, despite its European origins. Individual lexical elements, ordinary words, have been tainted with apartheid connotations: *ethnicity, culture, development, reforms, citizenship, law and order*. Although the independent and post-apartheid South Africa has done well to use politically correct terminology that neither offends nor uncomfortably remembers the past, these words and their politics will constantly resurface in a democratizing society.\textsuperscript{19} There is importance in healing collective memory by addressing these linguistic wounds. If the language in which conflict is remembered carries distasteful conceptions of identity, it will continue to be a remissive cancer in political transition.

**Pidgins and Creoles**

The colonial era left multifarious political, social, economic, and cultural legacies, but two of the most linguistically fascinating are pidgin and creole languages. A pidgin is a contact language, arising from circumstances in which two or more linguistic communities must interact where they do not share a common language, nor do they have the inclination to learn an entire foreign tongue. Thus, a simplified discourse develops that takes the majority of its vocabulary from the speakers whose political power is greatest.\textsuperscript{20} For instance, a pidgin in Senegal would likely have the preponderance of its vocabulary based in French, and a Nigerian pidgin would have the vast majority of its vocabulary coming from English; each of these is the language of colonizers. Pidgins are never a first or native language and usually are used in very specific contexts to communicate in multilingual environments, particularly to meet the needs of the politically dominant speakers.\textsuperscript{21} The vocabulary is topically limited, but a depleted vocabulary may still be used to cover a wide range of meaning.\textsuperscript{22} A creole is, most simply, a pidgin that is learned as a mother tongue by a generation of speakers.\textsuperscript{23}

Over time, pidgins adapt to their local environments and post-colonial countries use them widely today. They are given local significance and adopted into indigenous culture, as has been observed to be the case with West African Pidgin-English.\textsuperscript{24} Language is remarkably adaptive in that it evolves to meet the needs of its speakers, who may use it to express relevant concepts, feelings, beliefs, or identities that it had never been required to accommodate.\textsuperscript{25} This resiliency does not afford language easy access to an equality-driven future. It is a meticulous emotional record of socio-political interaction, and its continued use catapults that history into contemporary scenarios. A partial list of pidgins and creoles in Africa places their number at around 20.\textsuperscript{26} In some countries, a pidgin or creole holds official or semi-official status as a language in which government materials or information are published and disseminated.\textsuperscript{27} Thus, pidgins and creoles are a frequent phenomenon and exist alongside English, the globalizing world language, languages of colonizers, such as French, Spanish, Portuguese, and Dutch, and indigenous languages of which there may be hundreds within one politically defined
state. These indigenous tongues have colonially established connotations of inferiority or insufficiency. The linguistic landscape in Africa is unique and highly diverse, and there may be political implications arising from this. Language is the medium through which political empowerment and disenfranchisement are understood, and it is essential to the way in which individuals perceive reality. Confronting the past and attitudes about the future may require linguistic considerations.

In South Africa, a pidgin called Fanagalo is used today in the gold mining industry to facilitate communication among workers, and it is thought to have origins in the Natal sugar farms. South Africans, though, view the language, as an entity, with disdain, despite its continued use due to its symbolization of social hierarchies and the apartheid era. The word “fanagalo” likely originated in the phrase enza fana ga lo, which means “do it like this.” Fanagalo is a blatant example of how language embeds social understandings and historical memory. Krio, the creole language spoken primarily in Sierra Leone, has complex sources whose bitter histories all converge in the polyglot communities that settled in Freetown. Languages of North American slaves, Jamaican maroons, Africans, and freed British slaves created the Krio that has evolved to serve its 500,000 speakers. It is a less incendiary language than Fanagalo in South Africa, but its history is equally riddled with oppression and frustration.

To illuminate the position of pidgins and creoles, one might explore reflections on identity conflicts. Gloria Anzaldua discusses her mestiza heritage in terms of an inner turmoil: “I am an act of kneading, of uniting and joining that not only has produced a creature of darkness and a creature of light, but also a creature that questions the definitions of light and dark and gives them new meanings.” Within her one identity, she finds Mexican, Indian, and Spanish—the oppressors and the oppressed. There is tremendous potential for shame and explosive frustration in a racial identity with such heterogeneity. Linguistic identity may be no different, and the environment in which we can first explore this dynamic may be Africa. What does “reconciliation” mean when it is written in English, discussed in local dialects that are perceived as inferior—even by native speakers, and articulated with all of its visceral importance in a language that weds colonialism to the future of an independent African people? The word has a life of its own, before it is even put into practice.

Language and Conflict

At this point, it may be instructive to examine which countries that are going or have recently undergone transitional justice initiatives also have language diversity characteristics that could raise identity and political issues. Table 1 includes countries that have had truth commissions and countries that have received assistance from the International Center for Transitional Justice since its inception in 2000, displaying the official language of the country along with a partial list of other languages spoken outside the official tongue.
Table 1: Countries where Truth Commissions\textsuperscript{33} have Occurred or Where Transitional Justice Initiatives have Taken Place\textsuperscript{34}

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Country</th>
<th>Official Language(s)\textsuperscript{35}</th>
<th>Other Languages\textsuperscript{36}</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Chad</td>
<td>French, Arabic</td>
<td>Sara, more than 120 other dialects</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ethiopia</td>
<td>Amharic</td>
<td>Amarigna, Oromigna, Tigrigna, Somaligna, Guaragigna, Sidamigna, Hadiyigna, over 94 others, English</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ghana</td>
<td>English</td>
<td>Asante, Ewe, Fante, Boron, Dagomba, Dangme, Dagarte, Akyem, Ga, Akuapem, others</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nigeria</td>
<td>English</td>
<td>Hausa, Yoruba, Igbo, Fulani, hundreds of others</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sierra Leone</td>
<td>English</td>
<td>Mende, Krio, others</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>South Africa</td>
<td>Sepedi, Sesotho, Setswana, siSwati, Tshivenda, Xitsonga, Afrikaans, English, isiNdebele, isiXhosa, and isiZulu\textsuperscript{37}</td>
<td>Many others</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Uganda</td>
<td>English</td>
<td>Ganda, Niger-Congo languages, Niger-Sahara languages, Arabic, Swahili</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Zimbabwe</td>
<td>English</td>
<td>Shona, Sindebele, numerous tribal languages</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Morocco</td>
<td>Arabic</td>
<td>French, Berber dialects, tribal languages</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Algeria</td>
<td>Arabic</td>
<td>French, Berber dialects</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Liberia</td>
<td>English</td>
<td>Around 20 ethnic group languages—few are written, others</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DRC</td>
<td>French</td>
<td>Ligala (lingua franca), Kingwana, Kikongo, Tshiluba, others</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Burundi</td>
<td>Kirundi, French</td>
<td>Swahili, indigenous languages</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kenya</td>
<td>English</td>
<td>Kiswahili</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Almost all countries from this partial list have experienced processes of national healing in the wake of conflict and use, as their official language, a colonizer tongue. In addition, they possess other indigenous languages in great abundance. This does not reserve linguistic diversity of this kind to the African context alone; it merely presents coinciding conditions of post-colonial or post-conflict circumstances and a multiplicity of languages. South Africa is one key exception to this trend where specific steps have been taken to institute language policies supportive of an equality-based multilingual state, and movements to preserve minority indigenous languages have mobilized. These simple tables hide a complex dynamic: contemporary African societies articulate their political attitudes, expectations, grievances, and reality in the language of their once-oppressors. The other languages have likely been defined or even conceptually created by those foreign observers.

Stepping back from the realm of communication, Africa has been intimately familiarized with conflict of numerous kinds: ethnic, class, military, and state-society. Many of these delineations between ethnicities, classes, and even government bureaucracies are fueled by political semantics—they are definitional in nature and hinge on terminology and its history. Rwanda exemplifies the use of political semantics in the manipulation of language disseminated through public media. During the Rwandan genocide, hate media received a fair amount of attention as an instigating force in generating violence. Although some scholars contest the degree of influence that hate speeches and media had on the execution of acts of genocide, in the interest of exposing the interaction of language and conflict, the media provides an important avenue for the dissemination and manipulation of language. In Rwanda, definitions of class and ethnicity played key roles. President Habyarimana of Rwanda, elected in 1973, gives a number of speeches over his period in office that espouse a peasant ideology, an attention to agriculture and collective work projects, drawing class distinctions between the traditionally landowning Tutsis and the “true peasants”—the Hutus.

Media outlets in Rwanda before and during the violence of the civil war and the 1994 genocide were primarily government-controlled, and since the majority of Rwandans could not read or write, the oratory projected in radio and television was powerful communication. When language exists for a society in a primarily oral transmission, it is capable of changing—phonetically, lexically, and semantically—more rapidly than language in print. Thus, the hateful speech and ethnic slurs broadcast in popular media, such as Radio Rwanda, first used to order violence in 1992, and RTLM, launched in 1993 as a less officious, popular station of the people, could take a quick hold. Ethnic understanding, which must be described in political terms, was in the control of the Hutu-dominated
government. Broadcasts would call Tutsis “cockroaches” and urged Hutus to retaliate against injustices of the colonial era, perpetrated by Tutsis.\(^{51}\) The ethnic distinction between Hutu and Tutsi was largely based on colonizers’ definitions, and the frightening reality in Rwanda was that those definitions resurfaced during independence in viciously violent ways.\(^{52}\) The colonizers had defined ethnicity as a political tool, an assertion of authority that quantified and identified the other as inferior.\(^{53}\) In the aftermath of colonialism, the Hutu dominated government maintained these colonial definitions but redefined inferiority, manipulating the definitions to justify and exert its own power.\(^{54}\)

The genocide came to an end with around 800,000 Hutus and Tutsis dead, and the healing process will continue to be a long one.\(^{55}\) One of the initiatives of the recovering Rwandan government under Paul Kagame involved eliminating public registration of ethnicity to reduce the pervasiveness of ethnic labels.\(^{56}\) This points to the importance of the label itself and helps expedite the process of moving on, but Rwandans had spent generations, under colonial rule and during their years of ethnic tension and violence, hearing the terminology of hatred applied to identity. Words leave a psychological impact and also a linguistic one that is carried, like a historical artifact, into the rhetoric of reconciliation and renewal.

Rwanda is certainly not the first scenario in which language suffered a hateful blow in the wake of violence. Reflections on Nazi Germany led George Steiner to comment that the German language was “not innocent of the horrors of Nazism” because it was used as the method of conveying the Third Reich’s brutality and inhumanity.\(^{57}\) The language itself is not the same because of its associations with a particular manifestation of political power that targeted identity. Manipulative propaganda abounded under Robert Mugabe of Zimbabwe\(^ {58}\) and Idi Amin of Uganda,\(^ {59}\) both of whom operated oppressive, dictatorial regimes.

The recruitment of child soldiers in Africa also demonstrates an area where language manipulation occurs. A report on child soldiers in Mozambique and Angola highlights the use of re-naming as a means of separating children from their histories, families, traditions, and societies. The names given are meant to encourage combative morale and emphasize strength and power.\(^ {60}\) The difficulty, during the rehabilitation of child soldiers and the rehabilitation of the language in which they carried out violence, is to provide communities with a discourse in which strength and violence are not directly associated. This requires a critical view of lexical meaning in rebuilding societies. Power relationships are inherent in any dialogue, but in the dialogue of transitional justice and governance, they become acutely significant. Rehabilitation of the individual and the national psyche can take many forms, but rehabilitation of the language in which individuals perceive their political reality cannot be overlooked.
In the realm of language and conflict, there are several considerations that must be taken into account. First, areas undergoing transitional justice initiatives demonstrate two significant linguistic phenomena: they usually have a colonizer’s language as the official language of business and they have a very diverse list of non-official indigenous languages that have traditionally been excluded from political discourse and imbued with connotations of inferiority. Second, conflicts, especially ethnic conflicts, that have arisen in Africa are frequently couched in terms and languages that are not distinctly African constructs. The Rwandan case was an example. Colonial terminology in a largely illiterate society became used as the basis of contemporary power struggles and hate speech. Further, hate media, propaganda, and militant recruitment techniques, such as those relating to child soldiers, permeate political discourse with language use that is expressly oriented toward violence. When modes of discourse are usurped for the purposes of incitement and debasement, the undertones of that corrupted usage may resurface in political attitude expression under transitional governments. Across periods of relative stability and conflict, language is in constant use, but its semantics are not. Those in power will use language to articulate hope after extended periods of articulating hate. It is resilient and adaptive, but it is not forgetful. The difference between a rhetoric of reconciliation that is permanent and one that has the superficial impact of a propaganda poster may rest, in part, on the socio-political ownership of language and its definitions.

Concluding Discussion

An abundance of studies, articles, and books graze the surface at the place where these political conditions and language dynamics collide, but they do not focus on the unique conditions of language in transitional societies. Specifically, they do not explore the unique socio-political-linguistic dimension in Africa, where the interaction of history, contemporary political circumstances, and language communities may be of particular interest and significance during post-conflict rehabilitation. Existing investigations in post-colonial contexts focus almost entirely on colonization and its role in language policies and attitudes. While this provides an important backdrop for the understanding of ethnic identities and the subsequent linguistic delineations in a country, the studies stop short of conducting a detailed analysis of how these colonial linguistic relics have adapted themselves to post-colonial contexts.

A key component of identity studies in Africa must include a close analysis of sociopolitical dimensions and authority in African languages. Furthermore, definitions of justice, truth, and reconciliation need to be understood from a distinctly African perspective. External actors and strictly imposed hierarchies
of power cannot own the terminology. Thus, in order to understand the local connotations of these terms, researchers must conduct a kind of linguistic archaeology to unearth the way language expresses political attitudes today. Such an investigation can better inform the mechanisms of transitional justice by divulging critical sources of inequality and subordination.

Notes

4 Woolard, 1994, 68.
13 Ibid, 8.
14 Mputubwele, 2003, 279.
16 Crystal, 1997, 120-121.
17 Bhatt, 2001, 532.
18 Crystal, 1997, 69.
20 Adler, 1977, 12.
21 Ibid, 13.
23 Adler, 1977, 14.

26 Romaine, 1988, 36.


29 Sebba, 1997, 56.

30 Ibid, 155-156.


41 Ibid, 110.


43 Ibid, 193.


47 Verwimp, 2005, 28.

48 Des Forges, 2007, 42.

50 Des Forges, 2007, 42-44.


