

The Impact of Language-Based Institutions Set in Place by Colonial Powers in African Countries on the Development of Indigenous African Cultures

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Abstract

In her 1980 book *Man Made Language*, author Dale Spender asserts that our reality has been defined by a male-dominated control over the development of language through the suppression of women. In her analysis, she makes an even more condemning realization: that men are relatively unaffected by the negative effects of patriarchal language, given that “dominance has been no more a problem to men as a group than it has been to whites” (Spender, 1980). With this assertion, Spender’s theory is capable of being specialized through an intersectional understanding: men may control language, but not all men have been afforded the same power to do so as *white* men. With this assertion, we are met with the foundation of this paper: that there possibly exists another, separate power structure within the language hierarchy specifically founded upon racial oppression. When colonial powers invaded the African continent, a critical aspect of their domination was the assimilation of opposing cultures through the enforcement of European norms; language being no exception. Through this lense, one which recognizes the historical eurocentrication of language, it is imperative to question what sociological impacts have been made upon indigenous african cultures by language-based institutions implemented by colonial powers in the late 19th and early 20th centuries.

Keywords: Language, Indigenous language, Language policy, Language determinism, Racism, Africa, Colonization, Culture

Introduction

In the pursuit of liberation from colonial powers, African countries have shared common histories rife with revolution and rebellion. The Aba Women Riot, for example, proved political opposition to be successful in dismantling colonial institutions of government (Onwuteka, 1965). A common oversight when regarding the scope of colonial influence, however, is the disregard for subliminal methods of control in favor of concrete examples. Essentially, sociological implications of colonization are often disregarded in favor of quantifiable political and economic impacts. This has led to a greater understanding of Africa's political liberation from colonial rule while simultaneously underscoring the importance of *mental* liberation in securing the autonomy of African cultures.

Though the oppressive nature of colonization shaped the functions of government within African colonies, it did so while assimilating the cultures and worldviews of its affected populations. The introduction of European culture and values into the African continent expanded Europe's scope of influence to include African *thought*, a far more difficult institution to reclaim than ones of a political nature. Language policy specifically was a critical contributor to mental oppression throughout the history of colonization. Using legislation as a means of promoting European languages while discouraging the use of native languages was a common practice of colonial powers. The implementation of language laws, educational policies and material, language tests, citizenship requirements, and propaganda contributed as a whole to European "language policy" in Africa (Shohamy, 2006). Considering the intrinsic relation between language policy and language determinism, these policies directly shaped colonized populations' cultural perceptions of reality.

Mazrui (1993) states: "...mental liberation in Africa has sometimes been seen, at least in part, in terms of reducing the European linguistic hold on the continent and elevating indigenous African languages to a more central position in society."

Linguists and philosophers alike have consistently emphasized the importance of language in understanding and organizing reality. Similarities between observations of the highly influential linguists Edward Sapir and Benjamin Lee Whorf converge in the Sapir-Whorf Hypothesis: that there are certain thoughts of an individual in one language that cannot be understood by those who live in another language (Kay & Kempton, 1984).

Native languages, when transposed upon by those considered invasive (as in the case of the languages spoken by colonial powers), are extremely susceptible to the implications of this hypothesis. Most notably in African countries, the suppression of native languages and the subsequent takeover by European languages allowed the influence of colonial powers to intimately shape the reality of colonized people. Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o, founder of the Gikuyu-language journal *Mũĩĩri*, details the nature of language colonization in Africa: "The language of an African child's formal education was foreign. The language of the books he read was foreign. Thought in him took the visible form of a foreign language.... (The) colonial child was made to see the world and where he stands in it as seen and defined by or reflected in the culture of the language of imposition" (Mazrui, 1993). Colonial language policy must then be considered an important consideration for fully understanding Africa's quest for mental liberation from a eurocentric worldview.

The implications that arise from the history of colonial domination over indigenous languages extend far beyond the African continent. Much evidence of language policy in African countries is focused on the short-term socio-economic and educational objectives of such policies (BOKAMBA, 1). Broadening the scope to include their long-term impacts upon formal education, literacy, and language

development modernizes the issue to include present-day effects and maintains the view of language policy as a tool of oppression.

Body

Background

While nearly all colonial powers have documented instances of using language policy to assimilate colonized populations, their methodologies of doing so vary in relevance to the purpose of this research. French colonial authorities, for example, implemented legislation with the intent of linguistic-cultural assimilation, contrary to the German approach that “denied the colonial subject any access to the language of the oppressor” (Mazrui, 1993). With this in mind, historical examples will be limited to those policies which worked to assimilate African culture and thus had a impact relevant to determinist theory and the purpose of this paper.

The abundant uses of language policy present in French colonialism are particularly relevant given their emphasis on assimilation, and corroborate Mazrui’s argument that language policy aims “at destroying African languages and establishing the supremacy of European languages for the explicit purpose of controlling the worldview of the colonised” (1993).

French language policy finds its origins in the Villers-Cotteret, an ordinance issued in 1539 by King Francois I. Establishing French as the official language of the French Kingdom, the Villers-Cotteret disallowed the official use of any alternative language, African or otherwise, in both France and its

territories (Spolsky, 2018). Keeping in mind the philosophical framework of this paper, the deterministic implications of the Villers-Cotteret directly contribute to the suppression of African culture.

Concerning how similar policies impact individuals on a sociological level, the linguist Edward Sapir argues "Human beings are very much at the mercy of the particular language which has become the medium of expression for their society.... The fact of the matter is that the 'real world' is to a large extent built up on the language habits of the group. No two languages are ever sufficiently similar to be considered as representing the same social reality" (Mazrui, 1993). Sapir's stipulation is exemplified by the oppressive nature of the ordinance in French colonial Algeria. As documented by Franz Fanon, "The French language... seemed doomed for eternity to judge the Algerian in a pejorative way. Every French expression referring to the Algerian had a humiliating content. Every French speech heard was an order, a threat, an insult. The contract between the Algerian and the European is defined by these three spheres" (Mazrui, 1993). Whorf makes similar findings to Sapir, arguing that "speakers of different languages will map the world in different ways" (Mazrui, 1993). In the case of Algeria, the map provided by the French language cemented the reality of the Algerian people as one of inferiority.

Schools in Francophone Africa faced similar issues, given that additional ordinances following the Villers-Cotteret banned the use of native languages in educational systems. Students and teachers were required to demonstrate proficiency in French after a period of two years; failure to do so led to the dismissal of the student from school. Schools which failed to provide instruction in French after the grace period lost their licence to operate, and both monetary and non-monetary incentives were given to schools whose students received the best results on the yearly competitive examination in French (Bokamba, 1984).

The impact of Language policy in French colonies greatly disadvantaged students. Bokamba (1984) finds that students in countries most affected by French colonialism faced higher dropout rates, a

greater chance of needing to repeat a grade, and higher rates of illiteracy. Shohamy (2006) claims that the viewing of language as a political tool which can be “enforced” contributes further to mental oppression. This is especially true for the language policy of South Africa, which established eleven separate languages, and argues that this way of looking at languages is “socially alienating and cognitively disadvantaging to the very people it is intended to serve” (Shohamy, 2006).

This weaponization of language, however, can go both ways. Christian missionaries in British colonies located in what is now Kenya “insisted on using indigenous African languages in all their proselytising and evangelical activities” (Mazrui, 1993). Their reasoning was that by allowing the colonized to use their indigenous language, their teachings would be truly understood on a level more intimate and appealing to the indigenous worldview. Such practices only prove that colonial powers knew exactly how damaging language policy is to one’s ability to recognize and order reality. Their use of language policy as a tool of oppression was purposeful and calculated.

Conclusion

Whether it stunt educational growth or inferiorize an entire group of people, language policy in colonial Africa left an intimate mark on indigenous cultures. The weaponization of language by colonial authorities ensured that colonial oppression affected both the African way of life and view of life. Unfortunately, a complete overhaul of modern-day African language habits would provide little help to this deep-seeded issue. There are cases of resistance toward language policy in Africa, but none as successful or capable of enacting change as those political revolutions mentioned previously. Regardless, resistance is not the focus of this paper. Rather, it is imperative to understand the degree to which language policy shaped indigenous African cultures, and we did so in three ways: First, examining the theoretical framework of determinist language theories outlines the capability of language policy in

shaping a culture's worldview. Second, specific examples of language policy provided an understanding of the degree to which colonial powers weaponized language. Lastly, the educational and societal impacts of such policies corroborate the proposed relationship between language policy and the quest for mental liberation. Ultimately, our initial hypothesis is proven correct: There exists a power structure within the hierarchy of language development specifically founded upon racial oppression.

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