

**THE COLONIAL IMAGE REVERSED:
LANGUAGE PREFERENCES AND POLICY OUTCOMES IN AFRICAN EDUCATION**

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Manuscript Summary

Across much of Africa, governments are endorsing the use of more local languages as media of instruction in primary schools. Why is this a broad topic of interest? High ethno-linguistic diversity has become a standard and central explanation for poor growth, weak governance and conflict, particularly in Africa (Easterly and Levine 1997¹, Alesina, Baqir, and Easterly 1999, Collier and Gunning 1999, Rodrik 1999, Keefer and Knack 2002). Self-evidently, more homogenous societies function better than divided ones (Mill 1962 [1861]). Governments through history intuitively have understood the dangers of division among their populace, and have used many methods to erase the differences that could threaten unity. The European model relied especially on a common language of instruction to bind disparate language groups into a cohesive national unit (Weber 1976).

Yet, apparently ignoring these historical and empirical lessons, many governments in Africa are enacting policies that highlight rather than diminish their states' diversity. By promoting the use of several local languages in their education systems, rather than only a European language, they raise the possibility of perpetual multilingualism within their borders. The consequences of this change are profound, with implications for economic growth, conflict prevention and democracy.

The question that begs an answer is this: Why would governments choose policies that magnify their fragmentation, especially when a neutral language is available as an alternative?

The explanation is not immediately obvious. One might think that leaders aim to avoid *potential* conflict by granting concessions to groups that demand special or equal treatment. This would fit a rationalist bargaining explanation that assumes governments respond to language group pressures led by elites (Laitin 1992, Brass 1991, Weinstein 1982). Or, it is plausible that international human rights activists finally have persuaded (or shamed) governments to acknowledge the rights of minority language groups within their borders (Tollefson and Tsui 2004, Skutnab-Kangas 2000, de Varennes 1996, Bamgbose 2004). Widespread multilingual education thus may simply reflect international norms that favor protecting minority languages.

The increase in the use of local languages indeed results from both internal and external pressures, but they are different from these commonly assumed. I argue that African governments enacting mother tongue education policies are responding to two different forces – one a “push” and the other a “pull.” The push comes not from language groups or their representatives demanding rights to use their languages in education – indeed, many speakers explicitly do not want this right – but from an alliance of indigenous linguists and NGOs (often missionary), who use a recent accumulation of written languages and evidence of the success of using them in education to offer an alternative to African governments facing failing education systems. I call this alliance an “evidentiary community.” Their pressure, however, has been building for a long time, and it might not have been accepted officially if another factor had not provided a moment of opportunity.

This opportunity, the pull, is provided by the new discourse of a former colonizer, France. Rather than a vague call by the entire international community to promote languages in support of diversity, a specific, changed message began to emanate from France in the 1990s.

¹ Even studies using revised measures of fractionalization reinforce the idea that politicized ethnic diversity harms growth: Posner 2004.

Reversing its long-standing preference for French-only as the medium of instruction in African primary schools, France began to communicate its support for initial schooling in local languages. This was not because France had suddenly decided to care about local languages, but because its leadership had been convinced by a Francophone group of scholars – an epistemic community – that learning initially in a local language helps a child to learn French.

These, then, are the advocates of multilingual education in Africa: the strange bedfellows of indigenous linguists, missionaries, and French academics. They do not acknowledge one another; indigenous linguists have long been hostile to France, missionaries see themselves as removed from politics, and a link with religious efforts is an anathema to secular France. But their individual efforts have combined to create a coincidence of forces that propel this changed policy.

This account brings together two bodies of political science literature that normally remain separate: preference formation in the field of international relations and ethnic conflict in the field of comparative politics.

It engages the preference formation literature by concurring that material or structural factors only partially determine policy outcomes. But rather than debate “how much” ideational factors matter, the study goes to the heart of fundamental preference formation. In particular, it recognizes that actors’ *causal ideas* – calculations of means-ends relationships – are constitutive elements of their fundamental preferences (Hall 2005, 135). Goldstein and Keohane (1993) identify causal ideas as independent variables that can help determine actors’ decisions. But they do not explore how these ideas are formed. Depending on the relative malleability of these causal beliefs, this could be *the* critical area of study to determine major reasons for policy outcomes. Curiously outside the bounds of general preference formation literature are those working from the angle of epistemic communities (Haas 1992). This study brings together those studying preference formation within a rationalist context with those studying epistemic communities.

Actors’ beliefs about the effects of a course of action are always uncertain. Hall recognizes this uncertainty, and resolves it by pointing to the importance of *framing*: “A ‘frame’ is an effort to portray an issue in terms that link it to other beliefs” (Hall 2005, 134). Yet, his account is relatively free of agency; uncertain governments are simply persuaded by new ideas that are well framed. But the frame must be presented by *someone*. Epistemic community scholars provide the motor, but they neglect the framing. A group of earnest scholars appears simply to present a sensible cause-effect relationship that persuades policy makers by the weight of its evidence. My argument responds to this agent-structure problem by emphasizing the deliberate efforts of members of epistemic communities to promote their ideas in ways that appeal to policy makers’ larger goals. Rather than “cognitive baggage handlers,” a relatively passive image portrayed by Haas, epistemic communities in my story act more like gift wrappers or visual merchandisers, attentive to the attractive packaging of their message. Strategically, they persuade leaders that a certain course of action will lead to ends the leader already desires. An epistemic community in France persuaded leaders responsible for education policy in their African sphere of influence that learning in local languages would further their goal of French linguistic expansion more than the prior policy of French immersion. This shift in causal ideas led to a different message communicated to African governments.

But this is only half of the story. The other half examines internal factors. It confronts two prevalent assumptions from the ethnic conflict literature in comparative politics. The first is the perception that language politics, like ethnic politics, is necessarily contested and inflammatory. Because language is the “quintessential entitlement issue,” (Horowitz 1985, 220) it

seems decisions over which language(s) to use in schools would surely incite questions of group status or worth. The study shows, through surveys and interviews, that most people are reluctant linguistic advocates, and that they must be persuaded simply to *accept* mother tongue teaching in schools. They certainly do not pressure their governments for this right. While the “passivity” of the masses has been recognized by scholars, it is still assumed that elites can inspire passionate attachment to identity, creating movements that pressure governments to grant rights to minority groups (Laitin 1992, Brass 1991, Weinstein 1982). Rationalist arguments point to bargaining between elite representatives of language groups and central governments, the latter conceding language rights in return for the groups’ support or quiescence. A cultural right, such as education in a mother tongue, is assumed to be evidence of governments acceding to the representation of group interests as a solution to ethnic tensions (Lijphart 1977, Harpf and Gurr 2004).

I argue that the use of local languages in education is *not* evidence of pressure by language elites who have whipped up linguistic sentiment to gain political advantage. It is a much more constructivist than instrumental account. Rather than self-interested political elites, the important actors are linguists and missionaries. The difference between political elites and the educated linguistic elites in my story is that the latter are not competing to privilege their own language. They are not inciting ethnic sentiment in order that their own language gain advantage over others, but rather convincing pragmatic parents and government officials that allowing children to learn in *any* local language will aid their acquisition of a European language. Again, framing is critical. Theirs is a purposeful strategy. Language medium is presented as a pedagogical issue, rather than one of identity. Language politics – particularly language policies in education – therefore must be separated from theories of ethnic politics.

To make these arguments, the manuscript employs a variety of methodologies, both quantitative and qualitative. It starts at the macro level, providing a large-n overview of language policies in education across the African continent. Comparable data were not available for all countries currently, and certainly not historically, so an original database was constructed for the project, which coded 48 countries each year from independence (or 1960) to 2003 on the extent of their local language use over time. The scale ranged from 0-10, with 0 indicating exclusive use of a European language in primary education and 10 denoting the exclusive use of multiple African languages. Information was gathered from secondary sources for all states aside from the three visited by the author, and sources and summaries are provided in an appendix to the manuscript. These data are used later to test several competing hypotheses in an OLS regression.

The quantitative analysis can only confirm overall trends and invalidate some competing explanations; it cannot reveal the causal mechanism for the outcome we observe. Therefore, the majority of the manuscript consists of qualitative analysis gleaned from 16 months of field research in four countries: Cameroon, Senegal, Ghana and France. The author interviewed more than 150 government officials, teachers, administrators, missionaries, scholars and parents in Cameroon, Senegal and Ghana. In France, interviews were conducted among 35 high-level officials in the French Ministry of Foreign Affairs, officials in various agencies of *la Francophonie*, UNESCO, and linguistic scholars. These were complemented by several phone interviews with British government officials and officials of the Commonwealth. In addition, nearly 700 surveys were administered in the three African countries to a cross-section of adults, probing attitudes toward mother tongue education for their children. These rich responses provided observable implications of the hypotheses advanced by the study, and allowed the construction of an explicit causal pathway from the independent variables to the educational language policy in each country.

The manuscript contains six chapters, in addition to an introduction and conclusion:

- **Introduction** – This chapter presents several graphs based on original data to demonstrate the puzzle to be explained: there has been a dramatic increase in the use of local languages across the continent. When disaggregated, they reveal a startling contrast between Anglophone and Francophone states in Africa: it is the Francophone states that are increasing their use of local languages, a trend blatantly contradicting historical tendencies, while Anglophone states’ traditional use of local languages is stagnating or diminishing.
- **Chapter One** – *Constructing a Conjunctural Explanation* – This chapter provides the theoretical basis for the argument that follows. Preference formation in international relations and ethnic conflict in comparative politics form the central components, while insights from sociolinguistics, international human rights, public policy, and African politics deepen the theoretical foundation.
- **Chapter Two** – *Foreign Influences in Africa: Colonial and Contemporary* – This chapter looks at how foreign and domestic actors have interacted in Africa on the topic of language of instruction from the colonial period to the present. It establishes a sharp distinction in colonial policy: British acceptance of local language use in primary education and French insistence on French-only throughout the entire school cycle. For the post-colonial era, it examines especially the Commonwealth and *la Francophonie*, international institutions that have varied in their cultural and economic impact on the continent. It finds that the relationship between France and its former possessions has grown stronger culturally (and economically), particularly compared to the cultural links between Britain and its former African colonies, and it demonstrates a continued direct influence on language policy from France to Francophone Africa.
- **Chapter Three** – *The Formation of Causal Ideas* – This chapter explores French policy toward African languages and how it has changed over time. No longer in competition, African languages are now viewed as instrumental to French. This conversion in a causal idea can be traced to the writing and advocacy of an epistemic community, who began exercising influence over the leadership of France and *la Francophonie* in the 1990s. Their influence changed the perception of French leaders regarding the utility of local languages in education and caused them to include this element consistently in their education strategy for Africa. The chapter contrasts this with a lack of comparable agreement within the intellectual communities of the Anglophone world, which has led to ambivalence in support for mother tongue education emanating from the North, and an irregular application of indigenous language policies in Anglophone Africa. Unlike traditional accounts of epistemic communities, this study focuses on the strategic political activity of scholars, points to conflicting rather than converging international ideas, and analyzes the impact of epistemic communities outside situations of policy coordination.
- **Chapter Four** – *Assessing Competing Explanations: A Cross-National Comparison* – This chapter tests domestic variables such as government type and demographic composition in regression analysis alongside the external “French Factor” and finds them to have little additive explanatory power. One variable, however, is significant, and it points to a unique micro-foundation for the disproportionate attention to language in former French

Africa: the work and advocacy of language translators. I show that in contrast to the rest of Africa, where the majority of the population had its language in written form by 1930, Francophone Africa received many of its written languages in the second half of this century. The facilitating effect of language translators is thus posed as a complementary causal factor, which is further explored in the case analysis of subsequent chapters.

- **Chapter Five** – *Actor Preferences: Evidence from the Ground* – This chapter directly challenges the rationalist bargaining explanation (e.g. Laitin 1992) that attributes language outcomes to the interaction between governments and the representatives of regional language groups. It outlines the preferences that are assumed in the bargaining model, and then, using qualitative evidence from interviews with the relevant actors in the three country cases, reveals that some of these preferences are not accurate. In particular, the assumption that there are regional language elites pressuring government for language rights is faulty, a revelation fatal to the bargaining explanation, because without them, the model lacks a stimulus for a multilingual outcome. Yet, multilingual policies emerge nonetheless, hinting that another motor must be driving the process.
- **Chapter Six** – *Concentric Circles of Influence: Ideas, Infrastructure, and Individuals* – This chapter draws directly from interviews and surveys to make an argument for a confluence of different factors that propel multilingual education policies in Francophone Africa (and lack of such policies in their Anglophone counterparts). Francophone African governments are not pressured by language elites. Instead, they find themselves motivated different by external and internal pressures. Externally, they hear a new message from France, their largest benefactor, which opens up the possibility for experimentation that was never before sanctioned. Internally, they are presented with the infrastructure of transcribed languages and materials demonstrating their utility – these from an “evidentiary community” made up of language NGOs (usually missionaries) and a local individual who understands the importance of framing the utility of local languages as a tool for learning a unifying European language, rather than as a plea for cultural preservation.
- **Conclusion** – The conclusion reviews the argument and reinforces its contribution: new insights about the importance of causal ideas to the construction of fundamental preferences, and the distinction between language politics and ethnic politics. It also raises normative questions about cultural rights given without demand.

With these findings, we can solve the puzzle presented at the outset. Why are governments across Africa promoting local languages in their education systems? It is a phenomenon pronounced in Francophone Africa, and governments in these states are at the confluence of two forces, both promoting the same persuasive idea. It assures them that recognizing local languages does not pose the dangers of fragmentation that had once been believed. Paradoxically, the use of local languages can contribute to national unity by facilitating the learning of French. It is a new causal idea to achieve the same desired outcome. That the same consensus does not exist in the Anglophone world highlights its power in the Francophone sphere of influence.

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