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## Book Review

Lucy Karanja

*The University of Western Ontario*, luckaranja@gmail.com

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**Book Review**  
***Languages and Education in Africa: A Comparative and  
Transdisciplinary Analysis (2009). B. Brock-Utne & I. Skattum  
(Eds.). Oxford, UK: Symposium Books***

Lucy Karanja (University of Western Ontario)

This volume comprises a standalone introductory chapter (Chapter 1), and subsequent 19 chapters organized into four parts. Chapter 1 outlines the issues emphasized across this volume, which include, but are not limited to, the importance of using African languages in formal education in African multicultural settings.

**PART 1.**

The first part of the book comprises four chapters (2-5), focusing on general issues pertaining to the main theme, as well as specific language in education concerns in different countries. In Chapter 2, Qorro notes that English is used as the language of instruction (LOI) in secondary and teachers' training colleges in Tanzania, despite inadequate proficiency in the language among teachers and students at these levels. This has resulted in poor quality of education in Tanzania. Qorro recommends the use of Kiswahili as the LOI at all levels of education and that English be taught effectively as a subject in order to improve the quality of education and to make education relevant to the students' lives. In Chapter 3, Prah underscores the need for education at all levels to be provided in mother tongue. Children must also master their own languages effectively in order to use them for instruction in schools. Prah recommends harmonizing the orthographies of ethnic languages with high degrees of mutual intelligibility in order to limit the production of literature to large linguistic communities.

Similarly in Chapter 4, Alidou advocates for multilingual and multicultural education in Francophone Africa. He notes that despite numerous reforms in education, educational systems have not departed from their colonial roots, mainly due to the hegemony of international development agencies and African elites. Alidou offers concrete strategies towards promoting the use of African languages in education and communication within and across different African regions. Despite agreeing that African languages are important for social and intellectual development, Mesthrie (Chapter 5) contends that the adoption of African languages for teaching in South African universities is "a bridge too far" (p. 136), owing to student diversity, difficulties of terminology development, translation and development of study materials, among other challenges. Mesthrie concludes that it is difficult to develop a scientific discipline via translation and term creation, and that substantial time needs to be allowed for the development of effective scientific terminology for use in higher education.

## **PART 2**

The second part of this volume has seven chapters (6-12) whose focus is the language of instruction in formal education in selected African countries. A common thread across these chapters is that the use of familiar languages in education facilitates students' learning of other (foreign) languages and improves their overall academic performance. On the other hand, the use of foreign languages in education alienates the majority of the population from education causing adverse effects on the countries' development. In Chapter Six, therefore, Traore applauds the various developments in the use of national languages for instruction alongside French in part of primary education in Mali. However, initiatives to promote wide use of these languages in primary education continue to be thwarted by socio-political and economic factors, and lack of teacher training in local languages. Traore advocates for sound linguistic and educational policies, adequate funding, and regional collaboration in order to enhance a wide adoption of national languages in education in Mali. In another article on Mali (Chapter 7), Tamari found that national languages facilitated teaching Arabic as a foreign language in Madrasa-based schools. Arabic texts were translated orally into national languages by syntactic units, coupled with a constant switch between the national languages and Arabic in all schools. The author states that most students, especially at the senior secondary schools, achieved a good mastery of Arabic skills. However, it is not clear on what measure of achievement and/or performance she based her judgment. The overall academic achievement of these students is also not clear from the article.

To foster multilingual education in Madagascar, Rabenoro (Chapter 8) proposes the recognition of major non-official varieties of Malagasy in education, which many teachers, especially in their local areas use in teaching, as many of them lack enough proficiency in French as LOI. Rabenoro provides practical suggestions for promoting these language varieties, and presents a balanced argument regarding the need for both local and international languages. In Ethiopia, Yohannes' (Chapter 9) study revealed that students taught in mother tongue attained higher mean achievement scores in math, biology, and chemistry than students taught in English. Based on the assessment results, the author seems to hold a simplistic assumption, in my view, that local languages can easily be adopted for science and technology. Although he suggests promoting them for this purpose, he does not delineate how this might be done in Ethiopia.

In Chapter 10, Simango contends that despite 11 local languages having been approved as possible languages of instruction in South Africa, English and Afrikaans remain the main languages of instruction. This has contributed to high drop-out rates and failure among students. Simango concludes that promoting African languages involves putting them into greater use, and grouping them into clusters of mutually intelligible language varieties for cost-effective production of teaching materials. Miti and Kemmony

(Chapter 11) focus on a much welcome but relatively neglected issue in this volume—the role of effective teacher training in promoting African languages in education. They observe that English is used and emphasized more than African languages in teacher training for African languages in Botswana and Zambia. Hence, teachers graduate with a poor mastery of English and local languages. Sound language policies are, therefore, necessary in both countries aimed at promoting the teaching of African languages. Further adverse effects of using English language in education are outlined by Mwinsheikhe in Chapter 12. She found that science teachers in Tanzanian secondary schools used English as LOI despite their low level English language skills. Consequently, they employed coping strategies such as code-switching and punishment. These created an atmosphere that was detrimental to teaching and learning, resulting in deteriorating performance in science subjects. Mwinsheikhe urges for the implementation of URT (1997) policy that allows the use of Kiswahili as LOI at the secondary school level and beyond.

### **PART 3**

In order for languages to serve as media of instruction and as subjects of study, they must be standardized orthographically, have a descriptive grammar, a comprehensive dictionary, and have written literature. Thus, the four chapters (13-16) in this section focus on language harmonization and standardization efforts and milestones in Southern African countries. Chimhundu's article in Chapter 13 accounts for Zimbabwe's successful project involving the development of a monolingual Shona dictionary. To strengthen the Shona cluster harmonization in Zimbabwe, Mberi (Chapter 14) advocates for the inclusion of more Shona dialects into the Shona cluster both from within Zimbabwe and the neighboring countries. The unification of a wide range of dialects is economical in the production of educational materials and has the potential to promote inter-group unity, and facilitate the development of African societies. On the other hand, Mpofu (Chapter 15) proposes using morphosyntactical in addition to previously used semantic criteria for identifying Shona adjectives, rather than the morphological criteria, which have previously yielded a restricted range of adjectives. This will ensure that the standardization of Shona cluster is inclusive of all Shona adjectives available, and facilitate a more accurate description of this language category. Finally on this theme, Hadebe is critical of the current harmonization approach of Nguni varieties in South Africa, referring to it as "piecemeal and half-hearted" (p. 281), because of its focus on orthography only. He suggests extending the harmonization of Nguni varieties to terminology and speech forms, promoting it as a language of wide and formal communication.

## **PART 4**

The four chapters (17-20) in this section examine out-of-school strategies that might enhance literacy in African languages in multilingual and multicultural settings. In Chapter 17, Lexander found that university students in Dakar, Senegal are improving their spoken and written skills in Wolof language through the use of short text messaging (SMS) and chatting. Lexander suggests that these modern media of communication might become more popular and useful in facilitating learning the local languages than the traditional literacy courses. Similarly, Mbodj-Pouye and Van Den Avenne (Chapter 18) report that young adults in a bilingual school in a Bambara village in Mali enhanced their literacy in Bambara language through written code-switching between French and Bambara. Although each language was reserved for a different kind of discourse, both were connected through translation.

In Nigeria, Okebukola (Chapter 19) underscores the utility of children's oral literature in fostering reading readiness and enriching reading instruction in Yoruba. Oral literature promotes the development of oracy skills, which are a prerequisite for reading and writing. It also provides the cultural schemata that teachers can exploit to prepare children to learn how to read. To prevent the extinction of cultural heritage and to get children started on reading, the author recommends that oral literature forms be well documented and included into the curricula of pre-primary and primary classes. The final chapter in this section and the entire book discusses sign language, which the volume's editors observe has been ignored in African linguistics. The chapter's authors Akach, Demey, Matabane, Van Herreweghe, and Vermeerbergen maintain that apartheid resulted in different variants of South African Sign Language, owing to separated education for deaf children. Similarly, South African Deaf communities continue to be divided along racial lines, reflective of the persistent racial divisions in Deaf schools. Consequently, the authors are doubtful that the official policy of one sign language in SA will diminish these sign language variations.

## **REMARKS**

This volume provides a detailed exposé of the challenges facing the adoption of African languages in education, and clear suggestions for eliminating the multifaceted barriers to the development and implementation of effective linguistic and educational policies. However, care should be taken not to downplay poverty as a significant barrier to the adoption and effective use of national languages in education. For example, a persistent call in this volume, and a valid one at that, is for countries to allocate more resources to promote national languages. However, as Alidou (this volume) observes, many African countries allocate more than one third of their national budget to education, yet few countries are able to provide quality basic education to 50% of their school-

aged children. Despite the major achievements in the harmonization and standardization of languages with mutual intelligibility, I stress Mberi's (this volume) caution that careful planning and consulting are needed, especially where the harmonizing and standardizing involve cross-border language varieties.

**Lucy Karanja** can be reached at [luckaranja@gmail.com](mailto:luckaranja@gmail.com)