

# Language Policy in Post- Independence Africa

*African History through the Lens of Economics*  
Wheeler Institute for Business and Development

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# One challenge for newly independent Africa: overcoming the European *cultural* yoke

- The ideology of *négritude*
  - Origin: Aimé Césaire (from the West Indies) “*Cahier d'un retour au pays natal*” 1939
  - Development: Léopold Senghor (representative of the French National Assembly; elected member of the Académie Française and first president of Senegal) from his poem *Paris in the Snow*:
    - “white cold that burns worse than salt”
    - “*the white hands that felled the high forest that dominated Africa*”
    - “*let black blood flow that it may rub the rust from your steel joints*”
- Other first-generation leaders followed suit, promoting cultural symbols that signal authenticity and nation-building
  - Julius Nyerere translates *Julius Caesar* into Swahili to demonstrate that indigenous African languages are appropriate for “elaborated” and not just “restricted” codes
  - Other African leaders promoted name changes:
    - Gold Coast → “Ghana” connecting it to a great African empire
    - Joseph-Desiré Mobutu → Mobutu Sese Seko Kuku Ngbendu Wa Za Banga
    - Thomas Sankara w/ Upper Volta → Burkina Faso, citizens are *burkinabé* mixing Diola, Peul, and Mossi, thereby creating a national identity
    - A Somali intellectual created an indigenously created script (Cismaaniya) for the national language

# The Neocolonial Reality

- In no sub-Saharan African country does an indigenous language have a preeminent position in secondary education, upper levels of the civil service, or modern business.
  - Save for Ethiopia, Somalia and Tanzania, no country offers the entire span of primary schooling in an indigenous language.
- Calls from intellectuals such as Ngūgī wa Thiong'o (formerly James Ngugi) in *Decolonizing the Mind* have had little impact on public policy

- Average Distance to the Official language (ADOL)\*

Region	Average ADOL	Median ADOL
SSA	0.83	1.00
South Asia	0.34	0.38
MENA	0.33	0.30
North America	0.20	0.20
Latin America / Caribbean	0.18	0.08
East Asia/Pacific	0.17	0.13
Europe/Central Asia	0.11	0.07

\* Laitin & Ramachandran *APSR* 2016

ADOL is a measure of the average distance to the official language (as defined in its use for writing the constitution and basic laws) in a country based on:

- (a) each language group's population share; and
- (b) its language's distance from the official language as computed by its "address" in *Ethnologue*'s tree of world languages, e.g. whether it is from a different language family, or merely a related dialect.

For most African countries, ADOL (given English and French are of a different language family), is at a maximum, a value of 1.

$$ADOL_i = \sum_{j=1}^n P_{ij} d_{jo},$$

$i$ =country;  $n$ =number of language groups;  $d_{jo}$  = distance of language group  $j$  to the official language

# The Neocolonial Reality

The ADOL score for the average African country is much higher than for the average country in all other continents

This suggests a near maximum disconnect in Africa between indigenous languages and the official language of education and administration

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# Why is ADOL so high in Africa?

## **Ethno-Linguistic Factionalism**

Ali Mazrui – in his typical irony, offered that the only fair language policy in multilingual Africa is to choose as official one in which no one speaks

But something deeper had to be the reason. Somalia had three colonial languages (English, Italian and Arabic) predominating for a decade when the population shared a single indigenous language) [next slide]

## **Writing Tradition**

A writing tradition significantly lowers the costs of officializing an indigenous language

Out of the 47 sub-Saharan African countries only two states, Eritrea and Ethiopia, had a written script for an indigenous language before the arrival of the Christian missionaries, as compared to 18 out of 19 South and East Asian polities that received independence post World War II.

## **Bureaucratic interests**

Missionary exposure to the colonial language gave them a comparative advantage in securing the most lucrative jobs; they had a strong interest in the linguistic status quo (Sri Lanka, and Sinhala Only Act)

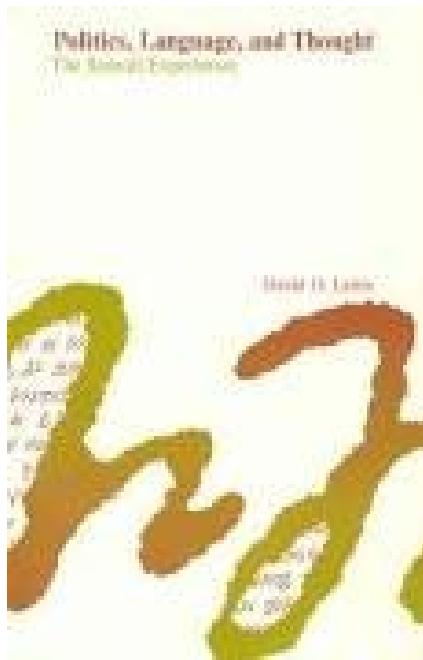
## **Parents' hopes for their children** in the European labor market

Laitin, "Tower of Babel as a Coordination Game", *APSR* 1994

## **Political Inertia**

Albaugh 2014 – the economic and political agendas of newly independent states precluded attention to language

Chronicles a two decades' long “script war” before Somali could become the national language



University of Chicago Press, 1977

# Why have the colonial languages predominated?

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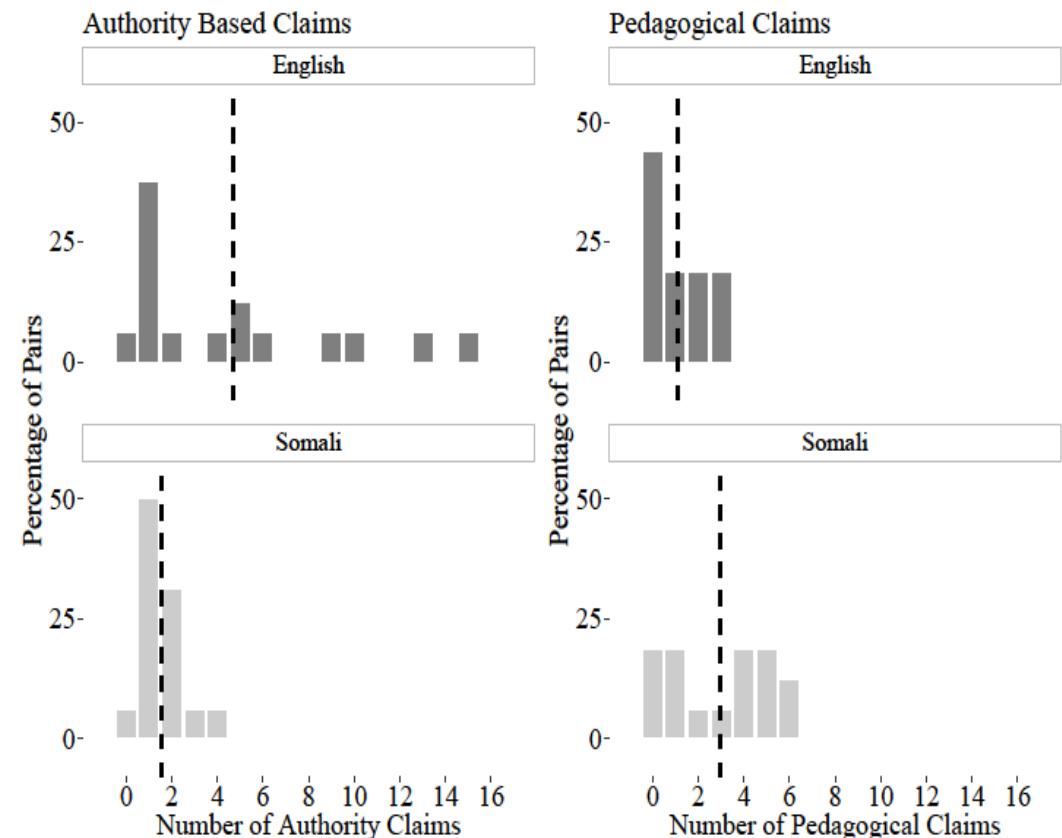
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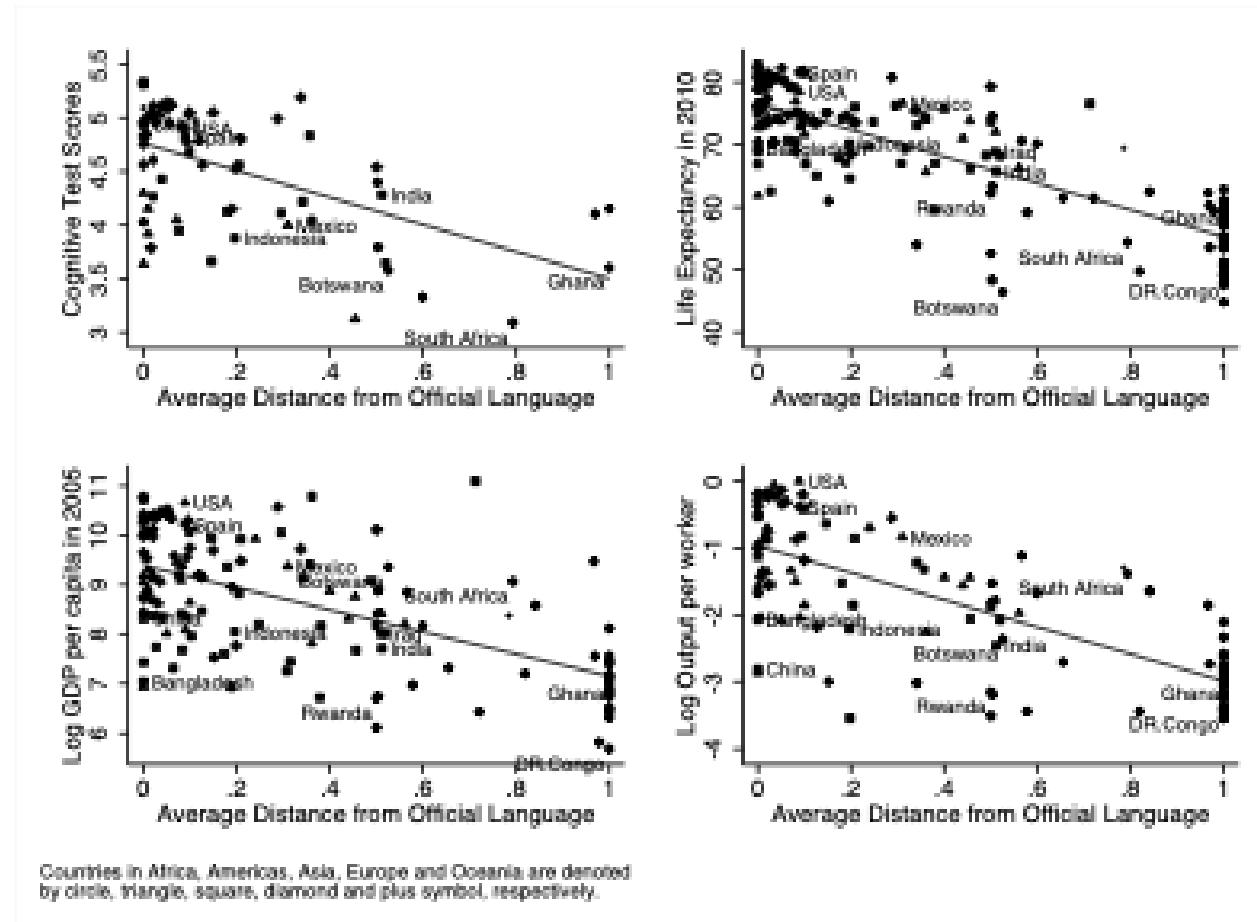
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# Cultural Consequences of Linguistic Status Quo

- “Field Experiment” in Wajir (Kenya)
- Bi-lingual secondary students in Somali and English
- Quasi-randomly paired for role playing
- Half assigned English; half assigned Somali
- Headmaster and Teacher roles with opposing views about prep exam for O-levels
  - Hard exam demonstrates challenge (Headmaster)
  - Easier exam builds confidence (Teacher)
- How is this resolved – authority or pedagogy
- Hypothesis:
  - in an egalitarian culture (Somali), authority claims would be deemed inappropriate
  - In English, associated with colonial state, authority claims would be deemed appropriate
- Data demonstrates the cultural consequences of language choice



# ADOL is also associated with socioeconomic outcomes in cross-national data



# Two channels linking ADOL to Human Development

(Laitin and Ramachandran, APSR, 2016)

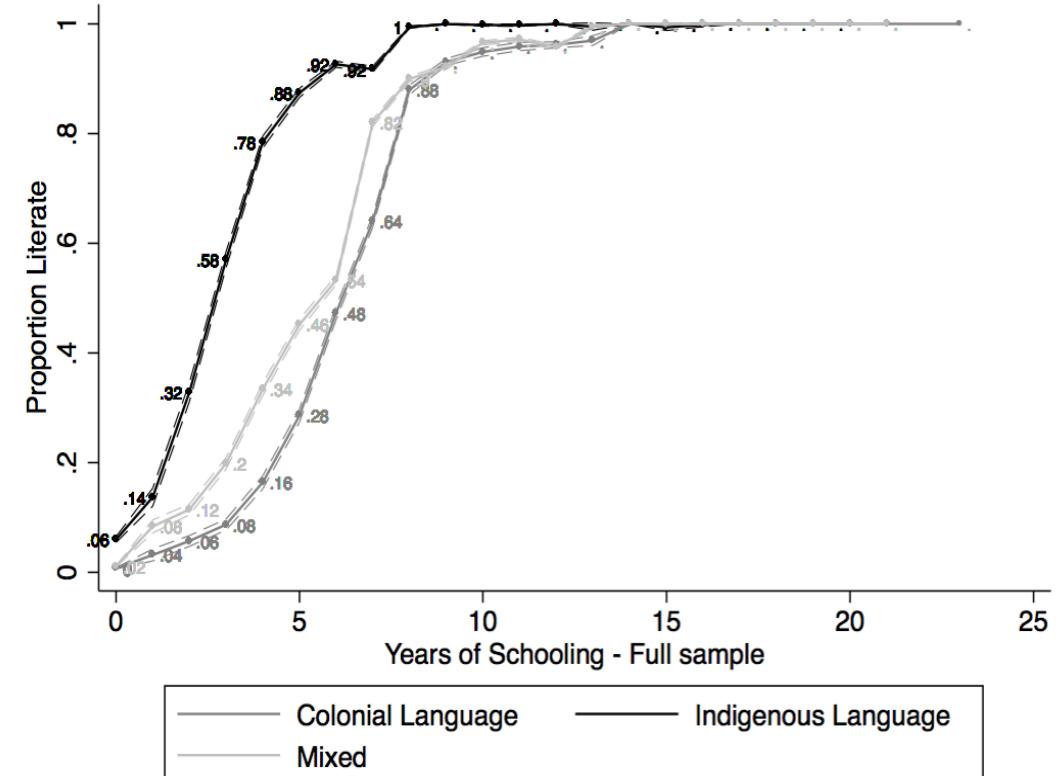
- Exposure Channel
- Southern and Eastern Africa Consortium for Monitoring Educational Quality (SACMEQ)
- Survey of 40,000 students in 2,000 primary schools
- 60% of students fail to meet minimal reading level
- Controlling for parents' education and SES
- Kids who were exposed to English at home had significantly higher grades in reading.
- Distance Channel
- Indian National Family Health Survey (NFHS-3)
- Sample of second-generation within India inter-state migrants to states with different official languages
- Linguistic distance is higher for N/S migrants than for E/W due to Indo-European north and Dravidian south.
- On a variety of outcomes (e.g. use of mosquito netting; knowledge of AIDS), those whose parents moved (N/S) with high distance have worse outcomes than those that moved (E/W) with low distance.

African students are subject to both low exposure and high distance

# Colonial Language Use in Education Inhibits Literacy in Africa

Laitin and Ramachandran *JDE* 2022

- Experimental Set-Up
  - 101 linguistic groups in Africa cross borders of countries with different language-use-in-education policies (Albaugh)
  - Data on literacy from Demographic and Health Surveys (whether person can read a sentence in any language)
  - Within ethnicity estimates reveal **even partial use of indigenous language instruction (for students that have completed 5 or fewer years of school) has significant improvements in ability to read**
  - Low use of indigenous languages in schools is likely the mechanism explaining why ELF is associated with human capital failure
- Similar results found in:
  - Laitin, Ramachandran, and Walter 2019 (Quasi-random experiment in Cameroon)
  - Bryant and Kim 2022 (Experiment in Malawi)
  - Ramachandran, 2017 (Evaluating Ethiopian education reform)



# Linguistic diversity is not destiny; evidence from East Africa

- Within Kenya (Miguel and Gugerty 2005)
  - Variation by district in ELF (since there have been no changes in rural settlement, level of local diversity is exogenous to ethnic politics today)
  - Outcome: greater diversity within district → lower contributions to schools and worse maintenance of water wells distributed as foreign aid
- Comparison of Busia (Kenya) and Meatu (Tanzania) (Miguel 2004)
  - Similar in ELF, in demography, and in geography (500 kms. apart)
  - Different in promotion of a national language (high in Meatu; low in Busia)
  - Level of community trust and contributions decline in Kenya with increasing local diversity; no such decline in Tanzania

# Conclusion

- Many reasons (historical and political) why newly independent African countries abjured the development of indigenous languages for education and administration
- But the consequences of colonial inertia are significant
  - Cultural autonomy
  - Human development
- There are alternative models
  - Think small European states where national languages predominate, but all students receive excellent instruction in a world language which serves them well in preparation for university and in the international job market where an international language is a sine qua non
- A great deal of aid has come to African states to improve education; results have not been optimal; this research suggests that colonial language media of instruction with low exposure to it outside of school is a likely culprit.

Thank you for your attention.

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