

Exploring the dynamics of language policy and language development: how Gabon can modelize its approach from the South African model.

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Abstract

Language is an integral part of the very essence of human civilisation. It is one of the most important elements that convey identity and can have a significant impact on a culture, society and economy. It enables civilisations to endure time and influences. It is also a fundamental element of literature. Language is not only a simple communication tool. It is rather, it is a mirror of culture which enables identity to fuel social relations. It is therefore difficult to underestimate the role of language in the development of communities and societies. Africa has a very large number of languages in use, around two thousand are listed. Despite this rich linguistic diversity, many African countries still depend on “colonial languages” in their social, administrative, educational, scientific, legal and international policies. However, some African countries have taken steps to promote national languages. In these countries, language policies and practices have become major issues in the quest for social cohesion and even scientific and economic development. Countries such as South Africa and Gabon offer interesting points of comparison from a linguistic perspective. This article addresses issues of language policy, contact and development. It proposes a comparative study of the linguistic landscapes of South Africa and Gabon as the two countries have very different linguistic profiles.

Key words: Development, identity, language, linguistic landscape, Linguistic profile

Résumé

La langue fait partie intégrante de la civilisation humaine. C'est l'un des éléments les plus importants qui contribuent à forger l'identité et qui a une influence considérable sur la culture, la société et l'économie. Elle permet aux civilisations de traverser le temps et de résister aux influences extérieures. C'est également un élément fondamental de la littérature. La langue n'est pas qu'un simple outil de communication ; c'est bien plus un miroir de la culture qui permet à l'identité d'alimenter les relations sociales. Il est donc difficile de sous-estimer le rôle de la langue dans le développement des communautés et des sociétés. L'Afrique compte un très grand nombre de langues en usage. Environ deux mille sont répertoriées. Malgré

cette riche diversité linguistique, de nombreux pays africains dépendent toujours des «langues coloniales» dans leurs politiques sociales, administratives, éducatives, scientifiques, juridiques et internationales. Cependant, certains pays africains ont pris des mesures pour promouvoir les langues nationales. Dans ces pays, les politiques et pratiques linguistiques sont devenues des enjeux majeurs dans la quête de la cohésion sociale, voire du développement scientifique et économique. Des pays tels que l'Afrique du Sud et le Gabon offrent des points de comparaison intéressants d'un point de vue linguistique. Cet article aborde les questions de politique linguistique, de contact et de développement. Il propose une étude comparative des paysages linguistiques de l'Afrique du Sud et du Gabon, ces deux pays présentant des profils linguistiques très différents.

Mots clés : Développement, identité, langue, paysages linguistiques, profils linguistiques

Introduction

Language is a fundamental element of human communication. It is considered as a mirror of culture. Dealing with the dynamics of language is not just about talking, it is more than that. Language keeps identity alive and is also a fundamental element that powers social relations. With a very high number of languages in use all over the world, it is then difficult to underestimate the role of language in the development of societies. Africa is known for its rich linguistic diversity. Studies estimate about two thousands languages in use in Africa. Despite that rich linguistic diversity, most African countries still depend on 'colonial languages' for their social, administrative, educational scientific, legal, or international policies.

In the same time, some African countries have taken the step to valorise home languages. In those countries, language policies and practices have become fundamental issues in the search of social cohesion and even in their way to economic development. This article discusses the issues of language policy, language contact, and language development. It proposes a comparative study of the linguistic landscapes of South Africa and Gabon; two countries with very different language policies but having some common points in terms of linguistic profile. It presents a comprehensive review of the sociolinguistics in South Africa, and in Gabon. It also examines the history, society and social interactions that govern language policies, their applications, and the rights concerning languages policy in South

Africa. The article shows how the model can serve Gabon, a country still under the linguistic domination of French, with its negative impacts on local languages. This comparative analysis discusses the language policy of both countries, with their similarities and differences.

Language is an integral part in the essence of human civilization. It is one of the most important elements that symbolises identity. It keeps civilizations alive. It is also a central element in literature. Countries like South Africa and Gabon offer interesting points for a comparative analysis from a linguistic perspective. They offer a rich variety of linguistic landscapes.

There is some literature which suggests that the use of a local language can lead to an improvement of a society in general and particularly in education and social dynamics. Webb (2002) asserts that the lack of resources and qualified teachers have been obstacles in implementing mother tongue instruction in many countries under the influence of colonial cultures. Hough suggests that African colonised countries are mostly concerned with the phenomenon of linguistic exclusion, as external languages have imposed their domination over local languages. The controlling influence, authoritative languages (mainly English, Spanish and French) were for a time seen as a means of social promotion. The Mexico Conference (1982), has recommended the necessity to preserve the world cultural values of which languages are the most salient element.

Using Gabon as an example of the ‘multilinguality’ phenomenon, we see that there are more than fifty different approaches to developing an inclusive policy that respects language diversity in that country, Idiata’s study of Gabonese languages shows that the issue of the inventory of the languages of Gabon is far from being definitively settled. However, despite this situation, Gabon could gain a lot by adopting strategies similar to those used in post-apartheid South Africa where the focus on language inclusivity is incredibly important for educational success.

With eleven official languages recognized by its Constitution, South Africa’s linguistic landscape is deeply influenced by its complex

history (RSA Constitution, 1996). About the South African linguistic experience, studies sustain that the nation's language policy seeks to encourage linguistic diversity and social cohesion, which is a testament to its multilingualism (Munene Mwaniki (2004), Carole Bloch and Neville Alexander (2004)). In contrast, Gabon has only one official language: French, which is the only language used and admitted in government, media, and education (Constitution 2024).

When it comes to the language of instruction, administration, justice or research, South Africa has an approach to the promotion of multilingualism in education (Alexander (1999; 2003); Zama Mabel Mthombeni (2024)) that could really benefit Gabon where French is the exclusive official language used in schools, justice, research and administration. That situation has a significative impact on students who are not native French speakers, mainly in remote areas of the country where even access to education, electricity, modern technologies and internet is inexistent.

Presenting an analysis on multilingualism in South Africa reveals to be an incredibly challenging task, particularly in the education field, where English remains the dominant language of instruction (Kamwangamalu (2013), Heugh (2009), Brock-Utne and Holmarsdittir (2004)). In the Gabonese case, this trend continues despite the independence granted to former French colony, the powerful influence of globalization, and socio-economic trends that encourage parents and students to prioritize 'colonial languages' (Bounguendza 2010).

In South Africa, there is a strong belief in the importance of promoting multilingualism within the school system. In Gabon the use of mother tongue in public spaces such schools, administration, markets, school yards or even the press is still viewed as a shame. Indeed, the collective unconsciousness is still influenced by colonial atavisms that systematically excluded the use of local languages in schools and administration through shameful methods like 'Le Symbole' as presented by Mexcent Zue Elihiyo & Prisca Soumaho (2021), Mabika (2012).

If South Africa has made a serious step in that field, Gabon is still on the level of intentions without real will to engage the country

in the process of local languages inclusion. Studies reveal that the inclusion of local languages in the curriculum is often viewed as a strategy to enhance proficiency rates.

South Africa's multilingual landscape, which is a product of its divided past, can serve as a compelling example for other African nations facing the challenges of linguistic diversity. Gabon, with its colonial roots in administration and education, must rethink this legacy to protect the rich and diverse cultures that define the country.

In the exploration of the ideologies that bear out the different models in study, Young & C. Helot (2003) support that the choice of languages to learn should take into account local contexts, the types of learners involved, and the diverse outcomes these models yield. The aim is to lay the groundwork for a discussion on the dominance of major European languages in the curricula in former colonised countries like Gabon, and so address the side-lining of local speakers' bilingualism and their home languages. In the Gabonese situation, Ndinga (2007) comes along with the concept of 'Gabonese language landscape' with regard to both foreign and native languages, in comparison with that of a language situation.

The intricate and often tumultuous history of South Africa has significantly shaped its language dynamics. In the period covering the apartheid system, only two languages were valued and enforced, Afrikaans and English. Research shows that African home languages were marginalised during colonial times establishing a linguistic hierarchy (De Klerk 2000g). For Artem Fedorinchyk (2024), the establishment of a linguistic 'hierarchy' favoured European languages over African ones (Nomlomo, 2007), which struggled for recognition and growth. On the other hand, Gabon, a former French colony, has a linguistic landscape that has embraced French as its unique official language despite the country's linguistic diversity as Hubert and Mavoungou (2010) expose it. In the same way, Kwenzi Mikala (2010) exposes the domination of French in the country's language scene, while African home languages have taken a backseat.

In South Africa, the advancements made since 1994 have sought to debunk the linguistic dominance of the apartheid era and promote the use of native African languages mainly in education,

government offices and the media (Ridge (2011)). The ongoing relevance of English in post-apartheid South Africa presents a complex sociolinguistic challenge, deeply rooted in the historical impacts of colonialism and apartheid. That situation can be comparable to French in Gabon with the difference that in South Africa there was a legal policy of exclusion. On the contrary, in Gabon there is not such official policy. The remnants of colonisation are still rooted in the country's language policy which excluded home language in education and administration. That situation was explored by current socio-economic dynamics, particularly the high value placed on the practical use of English. Analysing this intricate relationship De Klerk (2002) highlights the need for a thoughtful and well-rounded language policy that balances the goals of linguistic equality with the practical demands of language use and societal preferences that impact and influence peoples' needs for effective communication, and so, for language use.

South Africa has made strides toward fostering multilingualism and embracing linguistic diversity. South Africa's 1996 Constitution features local languages as well as colonial languages.

This dedication to linguistic diversity is visible in the country's language-in-education policy, which underscores the value of mother-tongue education and the advancement of African languages (Department of Education, 2002). In Gabon, the situation is quite different since there is no real governmental policy of inclusion regarding the promotion of local languages in education and administration. The Constitution (2024) recognizes French as the unique and exclusive official language while recommending the protection of local languages. The implications of those linguistic policies in both countries are really different and have consequences on education policies and socio economic interactions (Mabika 2024; Heugh 2000). The present study shall be centred on important areas including the evolution of language dynamics in South Africa and Gabon. It also discusses the consideration of the current issues facing multilingual education in South Africa and how Gabon can be inspired by the language policy of the Rainbow Nation.

This study shows that although the contexts differ, South Africa and Gabon face common challenges, the side-lining of African languages in preference to languages inherited from colonialism, and

the difficulty of reconciling symbolic recognition with effective recognition,.

Through a combining current knowledge of the linguistic landscape of the two countries with fresh viewpoints on the subject matter, this study hopes to uncover the reason why multilingual education has remained a significant problem for South Africa even when the constitution and many laws support this approach and why it is still a global issue to consider in the Gabonese society.

In South Africa institutional multilingualism struggles to counter the hegemony of English, particularly in higher education. In Gabon the absence of institutional proactive policy in favour of local languages is still to be questioned. Our analysis draws on the theoretical framework of language planning (Cooper 1989), combined with a critical approach to language policies (Spolsky 2004). We also draw on recent works on 'glotopolitics' (Blanchet and Chardenet 2021) to examine the power dynamics underlying language choice.

The issue of language policies and their development is critical to understanding how states manage linguistic diversity, promote social inclusion and build national identities. Studying the South African linguistic approach and proposing and proposing it as an inspiring model offers a real perspective for a shift in the Gabonese language policy. South Africa and Gabon, offer a fruitful contrast: one has an ambitious multilingual constitution resulting from a democratic transition process, while the other is a space where French dominates and local languages play varied roles in social life. This study proposes a theoretical and methodological approach to explore the dynamics of these policies and their effects on local languages development.

The research question of this study is: How can language policies in South Africa serve as an inspiring model for Gabon in the promotion of local languages and what theoretical frameworks explain their choices and effects? What are the outcomes of the analysis of the legal and institutional frameworks regarding languages. We want to analyse the practical implementation of policies and their impacts at different levels (education, administration, media, and labor market). We would like to identify factors that facilitate or hinder the

integration of local languages, and to propose recommendations to improve linguistic inclusion and support development. We will analyse Linguistic pluralism and language-related rights drawn on the concept of language-related rights (protection of language use, access to education in the mother tongue) and assess the fairness of policies. This theory examines how the state recognises, protects or marginalises certain languages. The issue of nations and identity is crucial at that stage as the language and national can foster national identity.

I. Language Policy in South Africa and Gabon: An Analysis

South African language policy is complicated and not really easy to master since it has 11 official languages¹. After the end of apartheid, a more inclusive language policy was adopted, alongside the constitutional recognition of linguistic diversity and multilingualism. The right to language and culture is enshrined in the South African Constitution Act 108 of 1996², while the Language Policy Framework for South African Higher Education Institutions (2002:7) intends to work for multilingualism and recognition of linguistic diversity within higher education.

The new Language Policy Framework for Higher Education advocates multilingualism, in agreement with the Constitution of the Republic of South Africa (1996). It imprints and theorises on the relationships between language, cognition and learning. The Language Policy Framework for Higher Education is intended to allow education communities, students and teachers alike, to engage in many forms of activities, including the cognitive and intellectual activity that education institutions facilitate. In accordance with Section 29 (2) of the Constitution of South Africa, that language policy is also concerned with promoting and enhancing the use of all the

¹ . Languages.-(1) The official languages of the Republic are Sepedi, Sesotho, Setswana, Siswati, Tshivenda, Xitsonga, Afrikaans, English, isiNdebele, isiXhosa and Isizulu.

² (2) Recognising the historically diminished use and status of the indigenous languages of our people, the state must take practical and positive measures to elevate the status and advance the use of these languages.

(3) (a) The national government and provincial governments may use any particular official languages for the purposes of government, taking into account usage, practicality, expense, regional circumstances and the balance of the needs and preferences of the population as a whole or in the province concerned; but the national government and each provincial government must use at least two official languages.

(b) Municipalities must take into account the language usage and preferences of their residents.

official languages of South Africa in all the functions of public communication, education such as teaching, learning, scholarship and academic research.

Gabon with only more than 2 million inhabitants in size, has more than fifty languages, even if the inventory is not complete. Ndinga (2005:70) contends:

Le paysage linguistique gabonais est une mosaïque de langues nombre exacte des langues locales reste encore à déterminer, mais selon les publications récentes ces langues se regroupent autour de de 10 unités-langues dans lesquelles ils sont mutuellement intelligibles (Kwenzi Mikala 1988 et 1998 : Idiata 2002 ; Mouloungui Nguimby 2002, Ndinga Koumba-banza sous presse).

Keeping on, Ndinga (2005:3) explains that in the coloniser's territories, the French linguistic policy was governed by two main ordinances.

- (i) La première était celle de Villet Coterêts de 1839 qui interdisait l'emploi de langues autres que le français dans toutes les fonctions officielles à l'intérieur des territoires français.
- (ii) La seconde était celle de février 1922 qui réglementait l'enseignement privé et l'enseignement religieux dans les territoires français : l'enseignement général devait être exclusivement dispensé en français et l'enseignement religieux dans les langues locales³.

³ (i) The first was the Villet Coterêts law of 1839, which prohibited the use of languages other than French in all official functions within French territories.

(ii) The second was that of February 1922, which regulated private and religious education in French territories: general education was to be provided exclusively in French, and religious education in local languages.

From that colonial ordinances, French, a colonial language, was imposed and is still used as the exclusive official language even more than six decades after the country's independence.

In that realm, the new Gabonese Constitution (2024) clearly states: “La République gabonaise adopte le français comme langue officielle de travail. En outre, elle œuvre pour la protection, la promotion et l’enseignement de ses langues nationales⁴».

The language policy in Gabon, unlike the South African one, is very French oriented, the remnants of colonial time, and is rather weak in terms of recognition of home languages. French is imposed and home languages are optional. In general, sub-Saharan African countries (if not all) host multi language communities. In most of these countries, the Constitution and the language policy do not have an official status to the existing multilingual phenomenon. For most of them, it is the language of the former colonial administration that is both the official and sometimes the mother tongue for new generations. This is particularly the case in Gabon.

A close look at the language policies of South Africa and Gabon shows striking differences. South Africa has been developing innovative language policies that honour its linguistic diversity and promote inclusion for everyone and every culture, even if the implementation of these policies is still facing key difficulties related to linguistic imperialism and its western epistemologies that still dominate education and linguistic landscapes, thus contradicting the Constitutions which advocates equity in language use. Meanwhile, Gabon has kept a 'copie-conforme' relationship with France, which has not evolved much since the colonial era. This has led to French being the primary and exclusive language in Gabonese media, education, and government, so leaving African home languages and cultures in the shadows. Hubert (2010:5-6) explains:

Le colonisateur d’autrefois pensait que pour unifier un pays, il était indispensable que toute la population s’exprime dans une seule et même langue. Au fur et à mesure de leurs conquêtes, les Grecs, puis les

⁴The Gabonese Republic adopts French as its official language. In addition, it works to protect, promote, and teach its national languages.

Romains avaient imposé leur langue aux pays conquis, pour la même raison. On donnait le fameux «symbole» aux enfants bretons qui parlaient en langue à l'école ; de la même manière, on l'a introduit en Afrique francophone, et par le fait même au Gabon⁵.

Hubert explains the colonial origin of public language policies and contacts as inspired from Greek and Roman invasions. Coming to Africa, the settlers implemented that policy in the colonies, some of these policies are still used today. In contrast, South Africa's language policy treats African local languages as equally valid and nurtures the idea that they can exist together.

II. Patterns and implications of language contact in South Africa and Gabon.

Language contact is an event in which people from different linguistic groups come into contact. Given the above scenario, it is clear that pattern and implication of language contact will differ in the two countries. In South Africa, the language contact consists not only of language contact among home languages, but also involves languages like Afrikaans and English, due to the apartheid history remnants.

Historically, it is common, and accepted, for people to be multilingual in South Africa, and therefore code-switching occurs across local languages regularly. Language contact in Gabon, is considerably less complex. Language contact is mostly limited to be considered the contact between French with one of the Gabonese local languages. Multilingualism consisting in people speaking different local languages is not commonplace in the Gabonese society. However, meeting people speaking different colonial languages (French,

⁵ The colonizers believed that to unify a country, it was essential for the entire population to speak the same language. As the Greeks and Romans conquered, they imposed their language on the conquered countries, for the same reason. The famous "symbol" was given to Breton children who spoke the language at school; in the same way, it was introduced into French-speaking Africa, and thus into Gabon.

Spanish, English, and today some Gabonese people speak Mandarin) is commonplace in Gabon.

Language contact in South Africa and Gabon has consequences on a larger scale. In South Africa, language contact has yielded new linguistic forms, including South African Sign Language, and acts as a language for social communication in some urban surroundings.

The language contact also advances social cohesion. It is a communication driver and it fosters ‘interculturality’. It is also a healing vector of a long history that divided cultures in the country. In Gabon, language contact has resulted in the continuation of French dominance on societal levels with people willing to learn other western languages as English or Spanish than local languages. This results to the marginalization of local languages and cultures.

When it comes to language development, South Africa and Gabon have their own and unique set of challenges and opportunities. In South Africa, the emphasis is on fostering local languages, building up language resources, and encouraging students, teachers and researchers to have the necessary skills in language development. Organizations such as the Pan South African Language Board (PanSALB) clearly sums up its vision in few words: “One nation many languages” and the South African Translators’ Institute (which is a professional association that offers a home for language professionals in South Africa) are at the forefront of language development, working hard to promote and foster language use, including local languages, in the country.

In Gabon, language development is mostly centred on promoting French, English or Spanish and other non-native languages with only a few limited efforts to support Gabonese local languages. The absence of institutional support and resources for local languages has unfortunately led to their marginalization and a significant lack of resources. The new constitution adopted in November 2024 did not go forward to really value Gabonese languages. It confirmed the linguistic hegemony of French as the exclusive language used in administration, the press, justice and the education system. It only recognizes the existence of national home languages without giving them a real official status. However, there is a growing private and personal initiatives to promote and develop national languages, particularly in

the educational landscape. These initiatives are mainly borne by researchers.

Language is a key element in shaping identity and culture. In South Africa, many individuals feel a strong bond with their mother tongue, as language is closely linked to ethnicity and cultural heritage. The role and interests of various cultural groups as well as sociolinguists in shaping language policies in South Africa, are commonly presented by South African Scholars, government and educational institutions. That policy helps to work on current language legislation in the multicultural Rainbow Nation born after a long period of apartheid. That policy protects and promotes South African languages through the preservation of local languages along with the acquisition of second and even third languages. In Gabon, local language policy should also be viewed as a crucial representation of the nation's identity and cultural legacy. There should be a real incitation for Gabonese languages inclusion in the national education system.

Despite the efforts made, both South Africa and Gabon are still facing some hurdles in rolling out their language policies. In South Africa, for example, there is a significant shortage of qualified teachers and resources to effectively support local language education policy, particularly in remote rural regions. Gabon is in a similar boat, dealing with a lack of qualified educators and resources and mainly of official policy of promotion of local languages. However, it is important to notice that many Gabonese authors such as Idiata, Ndinga Koumba-Binza, Kwenzi Mikala, Mabika Mboukou, and Mavoungou Paul Achille, with other researchers, have been pleading for years for the institutionalisation of Gabonese languages in the education system.

Looking at language use, both countries showcase a rich and complex linguistic environment. In South Africa, language varies widely by region; isiZulu and isiXhosa dominate in the eastern and southern parts of the country, respectively. The new experience of the opening of the department of Languages and Patrimony inside Omar Bongo University, is a real breakthrough and a shift to the development of a diversified Gabonese linguistic policy.

In South Africa English is commonly used as a lingua franca, especially in urban areas and among the educated elite. In Gabon, French is the official language, particularly in cities and among

the educated, while national languages like Fang, Punu, Nzebi, Kota, Myene, Teke, Obamba and other home languages are more prevalent in rural communities. In the same time, some other local languages are disappearing. If no real policy of incentive is implemented by Gabonese authorities, many languages will not be in used within a generation.

The linguistic diversity of South Africa is also reflected in its literature and cultural productions. In South Africa, for example, there is a rich tradition of literature in indigenous languages. In Gabon, there has not been such real undertaking since then, some ongoing researches are promising.

III. Implementation of Language Policies in both countries

The language policy implemented in post-apartheid South Africa, through the country's constitution, identifies eleven official languages, including nine languages of the African people. The ultimate goal of this language policy is multilingualism, linguistic diversity, and cultural preservation of local languages. The policy appears to be introduced slowly and therefore African languages remain limited to secondary status in various sectors such as, education, justice and government administration. In the Gabonese context, the language policy is not clearly identified. Ndinga (2011:140)

The Gabonese nation state has no main language besides its official language. French, the sole official language, is therefore the first or initial language of Gabon as a nation state. French, however, shows characteristics of a second language in individuals of the Gabonese population. Seen this way, French is the second language for three types of generations of Gabonese citizens, namely the colonial generation, the post-colonial generation, and the younger villager generation.

French has the exclusiveness in the linguistic landscape of Gabon. It was considered a foreign language during colonial times and today it has become a 'national language' or even a mother tongue for

most Gabonese people. Bounguendza (2008:13) seemingly explains the progressive status of French:

Au Gabon, le français a toujours été la langue du colonisateur, et donc, en quelque sorte, une langue de contrainte, une langue d'assimilation et d'aliénation, même s'il est par la suite devenu une langue choisie, une langue de travail⁶.

. There are intended strategies in place to promote the use of African local languages, particularly in educational institutions, but those initiatives are still weak, since the dominance of French goes far from the unique aspect of communication, it dominates economic relationships and international relations in Gabon.

South Africa's language diversity and complex history play out in the use of language in the country. In informal areas of use like family and community life, the language used is that of the African languages while in the formal domain of government and education, the language used is that of the English language. French is spoken primarily in Gabon and is used in formal contexts like government, media, and education. Kwenzi Mikala in Hubert et Mavoungou (2010: i) explains the linguistic situation of Gabon and the origin of the dominance of French in the Gabonese society and the effects on today's linguistic context:

Le problème de nos langues, il faut aussi le souligner, commence lorsque les langues héritées de la colonisation (anglais, français et espagnol principalement), autrefois, facteurs de promotion sociale eurent à créer une classe d'évolués sachant faire usage des parlers européens. Cette classe aurait participé à

• ⁶ In Gabon, French has always been the language of the coloniser, thus, in a sense, the language of constraint, a language of assimilation and alienation, although it has afterward become a chosen language, a working language.

l'élimination des langues locales dans les cellules familiales dont ils étaient les chefs. «L'éducation par le français rien que par le français», peut-on résumer la politique linguistique de cette époque. Les effets de cette politique sont manifestes de nos jours sur les jeunes, comme le fait remarquer Jacques Hubert dans son article⁷.

In addition to guaranteeing students teaching and learning in their mother tongue or other chosen languages, the policy encourages multilingualism and linguistic diversity have shown that learner motivation, self-esteem, and academic success, can benefit from such approach.

The policy about language in education, which considers the contribution of learners' mother tongues in early years of schooling, is one of the essential elements of a language policy in South Africa. The Department of Education designed and implemented the policy of language after the end of apartheid. Research supports the argument for this logically sound policy. It sustains that learners who are taught in their mother languages in the early years of school, are stronger in reading and writing than those taught and assessed through a second language. Yet the strong domination of foreign languages, that later became national languages, in colonised countries like Gabon, stem from the presentation of the coloniser's culture as the representation of 'civilisation'. In order for the local communities to get access to that 'civilisation', they had to use the coloniser's culture. This unfortunately keeps the domination of foreign cultures on local ones, Skutnabb-Kangas, (2000: xi) contends:

The relationship between the dominant and the dominated, the A-team and the B-team, is rationalised

⁷ The problem with our languages, it should also be pointed out, began when the languages inherited from colonization (mainly English, French and Spanish), once factors of social advancement, had to create a class of advanced people who knew how to use European languages. This class would have contributed to the elimination of local languages in the family units of which they were the heads. "Education through French and nothing but French" was how the language policy of the time was summed up. The effects of this policy are still evident today, as Jacques Hubert points out in his article.

so that what the dominant group and its representatives do is always presented as beneficial for the dominated. This can then serve to legitimate and reproduce the unequal access to power and resources and present those with more access as 'helping' those with less.

Unfortunately, such a policy negatively impacts local languages. The employment of a learner's mother tongue for instruction also contributes to the preservation and appreciation of their cultural background. The country of South Africa has set an example for other countries by considering the benefit which local community learners gain from learning through their mother tongues. In Gabon, a similar language policy would be beneficial in various ways. Through the recognition and respect of the languages and cultures of the Gabonese people, it may help support efforts to preserve linguistic diversity and cultural heritage. Ndinga (2011: 137) explains:

At the institutional level, Gabon is a monolingual country since it has only one official language. However, at the individual level, many Gabonese citizens are bilingual or multilingual, having French as their initial, second or even third language.

In addition, by giving students opportunities to learn and use their mother tongue or an additional language of their choice, it is likely to promote motivation and engagement on the student's part, and foster their learning while equipping them culturally to protect their identity. For Mabika (2024: 28), the use of French as an exclusive language of education with local languages being optional is dangerous for Gabonese cultures. Finally, by providing opportunities for students who use different languages and language varieties to succeed in school, the adoption of a language policy which encompasses local languages may help address inequities in language access. Yet in Gabon, the development of local languages is still hampered by problems that have already been solved in some other African countries. The languages of Gabon are neither standardized nor integrated into the education system.

Implementing a language policy that recognizes and promotes linguistic diversity is not without real challenges for both countries, however. One of the main challenges facing countries like Gabon is the issue of a real governmental policy of local languages promotion, limited resources, like qualified teachers and teaching materials, to support the use of multiple languages in the classroom.

Additionally, there is the challenge of finding a balance between the purposes of promoting linguistic diversity and preparing students for a globalized economy that often has languages such as English, Spanish, French or Mandarin as the dominant world languages today. However, the final objective of a national linguistic policy is to value local languages and cultures and promote them on international level.

IV. Language in Education

The right to education in one's own language is a right guaranteed by the 1996 Constitution of South Africa and the Language in Education Policy of 1997. It recognizes the importance of multilingual education in the Rainbow Nation. In its implementation of a language policy, South Africa has gone a long way in recognizing and supporting the linguistic diversity in the classroom. That policy shaped in South Africa has become the highly significant engine of the development of social cohesion, educational equity, and language rights.

In the light of this, it would be valuable to look into how South Africa's language policy in education model could be studied and why not transported to Gabon: a country that has also a high level of linguistic diversity compared to its population. A country like Gabon is facing the problem of the linguistic diversity that has a negative impact on education, can borrow a leaf from South Africa's linguistic policy that recognizes and supports the use of several languages in the school.

Gabon is a country with more than 50 languages spoken, gathered into linguistic groups. Due to an intense linguistic and cultural brainwashing, most Gabonese people take French today as

their mother tongue, while neglecting Gabonese languages. Hubert (1997 : 6) explains:

Au Gabon, d'après les statistiques du début de l'année 2001, 73 % de la population gabonaise habite dans les villes et les enfants parlent majoritairement la langue française et ne connaissent plus leur langue maternelle. S'il existe un phénomène de rejet des langues nationales par certains jeunes nés depuis 1975, il n'en demeure pas moins que d'autres commencent à comprendre l'importance de leur langue et lance déjà l'anathème sur leurs parents qu'ils interpellent de la manière suivante : «*Pourquoi est-ce que nous ne parlons pas notre langue* » ? Cet appel doit être entendu pour des raisons toutes universelles, et parce que les langues en elles-mêmes en éprouvent le besoin⁸.

This is due to a colonial past which was set up in the country, excluding systematically local people's cultures in the education system. Ngcobo (2007:2) points that

South Africa has produced a policy that is considered appropriate in addressing language problems in a multilingual society. The policy replaced the former language policies that contributed to the uplifting and development of English and Afrikaans as the only official national languages in South Africa. As a result of such policies, all other African languages in this country were marginalized. To address the issue of previous imbalance, the government declared 11

⁸ In Gabon, according to statistics from early 2001, 73% of the population live in cities, and most children speak French and no longer know their mother tongue. While some young people born since 1975 are rejecting national languages, others are beginning to understand the importance of their language, and are already casting anathema on their parents, whom they ask: "Why don't we speak our language? This appeal must be heard for universal reasons, and because languages themselves feel the need to do so.

languages as the official languages of the country to be used at all levels.

South Africa's language policy is built around a 'language of convergence' model. This model wants all languages to be legally treated with equal importance, and encouraged, using educational strategies and language development planning actions. This is reflected in the country's language education policy, which underscores the value of local language instructions in the early years of schooling. In Gabon, however, the focus is primarily on teaching French, with Gabonese languages planned as optional subjects in some schools.

In South Africa, the language policy has been a paramount element in designing language rights and fostering social harmony in a multiracial country long torn out by divisions from colonisation to apartheid. That policy sustains that language is a key to personal identity and culture. It goes along with the belief that linguistic diversity is one of the main elements of social cohesion and nation-building in countries like South Africa.

In Gabon where linguistic diversity is generally regarded as a potential source of conflict, following a similar framework can facilitate better knowledge and understanding between linguistically diverse communities. By recognising and supporting language rights, Gabon can embark on the pathway to a just and inclusive society.

V. Suggestions

By examining both countries and their language landscapes and policies, we found that South Africa and Gabon share some complex and nuanced differences when it comes to language laws, usage, and rights. Both nations are grappling with how to recognise and encourage diversity and uphold language rights. In South Africa, the language policy established after apartheid has set the stage for a clearer path toward these goals, although there are still significant hurdles to overcome, as African languages continue to be side-lined.

In Gabon, the lack of a clear language policy, mainly in the new constitution voted in November 2024, is still a major concern as

to foster local languages use in administration, education or justice. A path forward should be taken by Gabonese authorities in that way.

Based on the evidence above, here are our suggestions: Gabon could really learn from South Africa's language policy and cultural diversity to improve its social cohesion, governmental promotion of local languages using its educational system. By doing this, Gabon can foster multilingualism, which not only strengthens education but also enriches and saves the country's languages and cultures. It is vital for Gabon to create a language policy and laws that acknowledge and support both its native languages and international languages. Language rights, like the ability to use a heritage language in public, should be a top priority for Gabon as it is already the case in South Africa. We need to dive into the use of languages, in these two nations to make informed recommendations for policy and practice.

For policy recommendations, first, we need more cash and people power. Let us hire teachers, fund local language materials, and launch well-assessed trial programs. Secondly, let us stay practical, if a country starts with gradual bilingual initiatives, supporting major local tongues. Thirdly, let us link these local languages to jobs. Push for schemes that can turn linguistic ability into work chances – like teaching vocations, culture-related tourism, and media gigs. Fourthly, team up communities and local leaders when setting policies. This way, plans will be spot-on and gain folks' support. Lastly, set things up to track how well these policies do. Measure their effect on schooling, hiring, and community bonding to see where changes might be needed.

Conclusion

This study shows that although the contexts differ, South Africa and Gabon face common challenges: the side-lining of African languages in preference to a language inherited from colonialism, and the difficulty of reconciling symbolic recognition with effective implementation.

The research emphasized the complexities and difficulties surrounding language policy, contact, and development in these two African nations. While South Africa has made remarkable progress in advancing linguistic diversity and inclusivity, Gabon's language policy has largely remained unchanged since colonial times due to many reasons. Among them we have the lack of political will to introduce reforms in the education system. The strong presence of French in Gabon, used as the exclusive official language, continues to marginalize local languages and cultures.

This paper has also uncovered the linguistic similarities and differences between South Africa and Gabon. Both countries showcase a vibrant linguistic landscape, but South Africa's approach to language policy and planning, even if it is more sophisticated, is highlighting the significance of linguistic diversity and social harmony. In contrast, Gabon, with its choice to still use French as the unique official language, is facing challenges like language shift and loss, which threaten to undermine its cultural heritage.

The insights from this study are crucial for shaping language policy and practice in Africa after colonization. They reveal the need for a more detailed understanding of the complexities involved in language policy, language contact, and language development within multilingual societies. Furthermore, they highlight the significance of promoting linguistic diversity and inclusivity, recognizing the worth of local languages and cultures, and advocating for language development projects that emphasize social justice and equity.

In South Africa, language contact has led to the emergence of new linguistic forms and strengthened social cohesion. South Africa's approach to linguistic policy could serve as a valuable model for countries like Gabon as they work through the complexities of linguistic diversity and its impact on education. By embracing and promoting the use of multiple languages in schools, Gabon can not only honour its vibrant cultural heritage but also enhance student engagement and academic achievement while addressing issues of linguistic inequality. However, implementing such a policy will

demand careful planning, wise allocation of resources, and a strong commitment to overcome the challenges that come with promoting linguistic diversity in education.

If we look into the intricacies of language policy, language contact, and language development taking a more nuanced path, then we would be on the right track towards creating more inclusive and equitable societies where people value linguistic diversity and promote social justice. Nelson Mandela once said that if you talk to a man in a language he understands, that goes to his head. If you talk to him in his language, that goes to his heart. Gabon needs to explore and open that new way to consider the development of a society where there is value for linguistic diversity based on the valorisation of Gabonese languages and education for all.

Yet, there are ways forward: the integration of local languages into the media and digital technologies (Michael Kretzer & Russell Kaschula. 2022), or bilingual educational models. Genuine political will, coupled with monitoring mechanisms, remains essential to transform principles into practice.

Through a combining current knowledge of the linguistic landscape of the two countries with fresh viewpoints on the subject matter, this study hopes to uncover the reason why multilingual education has remained a significant problem for South Africa where the constitution and many laws support this approach, and why it is still a global issue to consider in the Gabonese society.

This research looks at how language policy formulation affects the development of local languages across various cultures and regions. It covers a wide range of sources, including academic journals and policy papers, to explore the link between language policies and their development in both countries.

Examining South Africa's language promotion framework provides insight into how different models of language management influence language development, particularly the promotion of local languages. For countries such as Gabon, where the language of education, science, international trade, culture, administration and the courts is French, the South African approach can serve as a model for a language policy that differs from that inherited from the colonial era.

A mixed theoretical approach (language rights, linguistic capital, governance) combined with a mixed methodology has provided a solid framework for analysing these dynamics. The expected results should inform pragmatic, context-sensitive and inclusion-oriented policies, with a view to transforming linguistic diversity into an asset for development.

This study shows that although the contexts differ, South Africa and Gabon face common challenges: the side-lining of African languages in preference to a language inherited from colonialism, and the difficulty of reconciling symbolic recognition with effective implementation.

In South Africa, institutional multilingualism struggles to counter the hegemony of English, particularly in higher education. In Gabon, the absence of a proactive policy in favour of language policy and language development are central issues in multilingual states, where the management of linguistic diversity influences social cohesion, education, and governance. This article presents the study of South Africa and Gabon, two African countries with distinct political and sociolinguistic trajectories but facing similar challenges regarding linguistic pluralism.

South Africa, with its eleven official languages, embodies a model of ambitious constitutional recognition, though it is marked by persistent inequalities in the use of indigenous languages in the face of the dominance of English. Gabon, on the other hand, with French as its sole official language, exemplifies a centralizing approach, where local languages struggle to find a place in public institutions despite their cultural vitality.

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