

[https://doi.org/10.52326/jss.utm.2023.6\(4\).08](https://doi.org/10.52326/jss.utm.2023.6(4).08)  
811.4:37(680+688.5)



## THE LINGUISTIC RECONSTRUCTION OF POST-COLONIAL SOUTH AFRICA AND LESOTHO: ENGLISH DOMINANCE DILEMMA

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Received: 10. 25. 2023

Accepted: 11. 28. 2023

**Abstract.** Language was one of the tools used by colonialists in destroying the heritage of African nations. Yet, there is limited research on how African nations have linguistically fared post their independence. The purpose of this paper is to assess the endeavors of two neighboring African governments, South Africa and Lesotho, in the post-colonial era to linguistically reconstruct their nations. Qualitative data were collected through a comparative analysis of these two countries' constitutions, with a focus on language rights and language in education. The data analyses were conducted using the language planning theory to evaluate how available policies enhance the position of previously marginalized African languages. The results revealed that whilst South Africa has a linguistic diversity challenge and Lesotho a language homogeneity advantage, they both still retain a colonial language, English. The international status of English has resulted in it retaining its colonial dominance as a lingua franca, a language of economy, politics and education. There is still more work that needs to be done by African nations to redress the past oppressive policies that devalued their languages. Education should be given priority as a vehicle to revitalize and intellectualize African languages and liberating Africa from its dependency on colonial languages, whilst also promoting multilingualism.

**Keywords:** *African languages, language planning, nationalism, multilingualism, transformation.*

**Rezumat.** Limba a fost unul dintre instrumentele folosite de colonialiști în distrugerea moștenirii națiunilor africane. Cu toate acestea, există cercetări limitate asupra modului în care națiunile africane și-au îmbunătățit situația lingvistică după independența lor. Scopul acestei lucrări este de a evalua eforturile a două guverne africane vecine, Africa de Sud și Lesotho, în epoca postcolonială de a-și reconstrui lingvistic națiunile. Datele calitative au fost colectate printr-o analiză comparativă a constituțiilor acestor două țări, cu accent pe drepturile lingvistice și limba în educație. Analizele datelor au fost efectuate folosind teoria planificării lingvistice pentru a evalua modul în care politicile disponibile îmbunătățesc

poziția limbilor africane marginalizate anterior. Rezultatele au arătat că, în timp ce Africa de Sud are o provocare privind diversitatea lingvistică, iar Lesotho un avantaj de omogenitate a limbii, ambele țări păstrează încă o limbă colonială, engleza. Statutul internațional al limbii engleze a făcut ca aceasta să-și păstreze dominația colonială ca *lingua franca*, o limbă a economiei, politicii și educației. Mai este încă necesară pentru națiunile africane multă muncă pentru a remedia politicile opresive din trecut, care le-au devalorizat limbile. Educația ar trebui să aibă prioritate ca vehicul de revitalizare și intelectualizare a limbilor africane și de eliberare a Africii de dependența sa de limbile coloniale, promovând în același timp multilingvismul.

**Cuvinte cheie:** *limbi africane, planificare lingvistică, naționalism, multilingvism, transformare.*

## 1. Introduction

Colonialism in Africa was engineered to take from the conquered and destroy what the people valued [1]. One such area where the full might of the colonizers was strongly felt was on Africa's rich linguistic heritage that was destroyed and replaced with the colonizers' languages [2]. The linguistic destruction was due to the colonizers' negative attitudes towards non-Europeans languages which they labelled as "jargons", "savage", and "primitive" and their speakers whom they deemed mentally inferior and uncivilized [3] coming from the "Dark Continent" characterized by tribal conflicts [4]. Hence today some parts of Africa are distinguished by the languages of their colonizers which has resulted in the so-called Francophone and Anglophone countries. Francophone countries were colonized by France and as a result use French as their common language of communication to conduct business and acquire education. A similar situation prevails in Anglophone countries which rely on English due to Britain's previous occupation.

In other countries it has not been just one of these colonizers but more at different times which has made their linguistic situations to be even far more complex. India had to suffer from the struggle involving Portuguese, French and the British who all wanted to colonize them until the English won and enforced their language [5]. Post-independence has equally witnessed this linguistic competition. In Algeria the national language which is Arabic has for many years been in rivalry with French and English for status and dominance as a language of administration and education [6]. It appears that this jostling for power has been perpetuated by politicians who seem unable to decide on promoting nationalism without clinging to a colonizers' language.

Post-independence has seen many countries trying to revitalize their national languages of communication as a weapon of freedom [7] from colonial languages. One such country is Tanzania where an African language called kiSwahili, rather than a colonizer's language, is being used as a *lingua franca* to deal with linguistic diversity in which there are 99 African languages [7]. Yet, other countries such as Nigeria that has about 505 indigenous languages has only permitted African languages use in pre-primary and primary education and retained English for the rest of education and business use [8]. Oloruntoba-Oju and van Pinxteren [8] argue that this political position is unacceptable because the country could still explore the multilingual solution in which at least a limited number of languages could be developed or intellectualized. The authors cite Germany that has also adopted one common language, Hochdeutsch, in the presence of 15 other languages. For Nigeria, they propose the adoption of its three major languages: Hausa, Yoruba and Igbo [8].

Indonesia is an even better example in which despite having 779 languages they still adopted Indonesian as a common indigenous language post-independence, instead of colonial English [9]. The biggest challenge for higher education institutions with doing away completely with English is that they want to remain relevant in the international space such as in sharing research work through publications. In such circumstances, English becomes an ideological choice based on practical rather than political reasons [10]. This interest in English has spread across many European countries where universities have prioritized the attraction of foreign students, staff and internationalization [11].

The presented diverse scenario from across the globe makes it important to establish what attempts have been made by some African countries to rid themselves of colonizers' languages. One area to examine are the constitutions because they are supreme laws of such African countries with a focus on language policies. A focus on language policies per se appears to be important considering the role of policy in empowering citizens and liberating them from bondages of slavery and abject poverty. Indeed, language has been instrumental in transitioning many countries from colonialism to independence [12]. However, policy without practice in the form of policy implementation would be incomplete. Hence, policy should be evaluated against implementation endeavors. In the same token, this article comparatively evaluates the language policies of two neighboring African states which are South Africa and Lesotho.

The aim is to understand these two countries' attempts at restoring the dignity of their citizens by revitalizing their languages. The question that drives this process is: what efforts have been made by African leaders to reconstruct their countries linguistically? In attempting to find answers to this question we draw from language planning theory since it guides the process of official language selection within a multilingual country.

## **2. Literature Review**

The article is framed on language planning as used synonymously with language policy because of the connection between how the planned language will be taught and managed in a country as expressed in policy documents [13]. Hence, the term Language Policy and Planning (LPP) is often used to describe the connection between the two. In this respect, LPP focusses on the role of individuals as actors in the process of policy formulation and implementation [14]. The political leaders of African countries under scrutiny are therefore considered as actors involved in language policy.

Language planning on its own is viewed as "political and administrative activity" [15] conducted as part of "deliberate language change" [16]. This activity that is aimed at changing language status occurs "typically at the national level" [17] with the intention of addressing "social, political or educational (or a mixture of all three)" problems [18]. In support of language planning, there is language policy promulgated at political level that should be in accordance with the constitution of the said country. In this instance, the policies should indicate changes in language status of indigenous languages post colonization or post-independence. These could include decisions on national language(s), languages of instruction and the teaching of foreign languages [19]. Yet, [19] caution that some of these decisions on languages are ideologically influenced because there would be no intentions in the form of specifics to be followed in enacting policies. This may result in citizens finding ways of disregarding policies. Manan and co-workers [20] refer to conflict between policy and practice in Pakistan where learners are prohibited by teachers from using their native

languages in elite schools with the hope that it would promote fluency in English, a colonial language. This happens despite policies to the contrary. It is however not all gloom and doom as some success stories have been shared about one of the few universities worldwide that teach solely in an indigenous language, Sámi University of Applied Sciences (SUAS) in Norway [21]. Thingnes [17] attributes this success to the supportive Norwegian national language policy which states that Norwegian should be the main language of education with English only used when necessary.

Language policy informs inquiry on language management, practices and beliefs [22]. An examination of one without the other would be incomplete because policy alone would not provide insight into what motivated policy and its implementation strategies [23]. Hence, this study examines political decisions taken in the form of existing language policies about resolving language problems in the post-colonial African context of the two selected nations. The language problems emanate from the colonial era the two nations have emerged from that were dominated by colonial languages. It therefore becomes important to examine how leaders in these countries have sought to address this problem.

### **3. Materials and Methods**

The study is a comparative and qualitative in that it undertakes an analyses of policy documents of the two African countries under review. The two countries that form the case study are South Africa and Lesotho because of their location in the Southern African Development Community (SADC) and close proximity to each other. The study is desktop in its nature.

### **4. Results**

#### **4.1 South Africa**

South Africa previously recognized only two colonial languages in the country as official languages. These were English and Afrikaans. On the one hand, English was associated with the British colonialism. On the other hand, Afrikaans was associated with the apartheid regime of the Boer settlers that disenfranchised African citizens of the country who considered it as the language of the oppressor [24, 25]. This is due to that the Afrikaner-dominated National Party (NP) that governed South Africa between 1948 and 1994 when the country became democratic was behind the apartheid policy that enforced its use among Africans [26]. Kotze and Senekal [26] regard this stigma as one of the reasons Afrikaans came up in the October 2015 higher education protests (#AfrikaansMustFall) in South Africa because it still alienates black students in education. It is because of this history that the issue of languages in South Africa has come to be associated with power and powerlessness that remains post colonialism and post-apartheid [27].

Afrikaans itself has its roots in Dutch even though it is mainly and uniquely South African in that it is made of a mixture of languages that include African and Khoisan languages, English, Malay, Portuguese and German. At the same time, Afrikaans has influenced other South African languages, including English that borrow from it [28]. The apartheid government ensured that the language was well developed through language policies backed by exceptional funding and making it compulsory throughout education. As a result, today it stands as one of the two, after English, dominant languages of teaching and learning and the third widely spoken language at 13.5% [29].

The most dominant language is isiZulu with English ranked fourth [30]. IsiZulu dominance is evident in that it is the widely spoken language across different parts of the

country and media platforms. This commonality of isiZulu and ease of use is due to the existence of isiZulu-speakers across different parts of the country and the fact that it is associated with other Nguni languages such as isiXhosa, isiNdebele and isiSwati that share similar syntax and grammar [31]. Statista Research [32] find that isiZulu is spoken by around 25.3% of South African inside households in which case it is followed by isiXhosa (14.8%) and Afrikaans (12.2%). Moreover, it is quite common for isiZulu to be mixed with English and other languages in speech and written form by businesses, politicians, artists and the South African public at large [33, 34].

Even though English is ranked fourth it however dominates as the lingua-franca in South Africa and globally because of its high socio-economic status which allow it to be used in education, politics and economy [31]. However, a study by Posel, Hunter and Rudwick [35] find that the notion of English as an oral lingua franca in South Africa that is likely to lead to the death of African languages might have been exaggerated by previous research. Rather, the authors find that most Africans report using their languages inside and outside home. This is confirmed by Statista Research Department [32] who rank English as the sixth language commonly spoken in households at 8.1 percent, while they acknowledge it as the second (16.6%) most used language outside of homes.

Post colonialism and post democracy, the Republic of South Africa's [36] Constitution (Act No. 108 of 1996) recognizes nine African languages together with these two previously only official languages. Hence, the Constitution gave the official status to 11 languages which are English, Afrikaans, IsiZulu, IsiXhosa, Northern Sotho, Southern Sotho, Tswana, IsiNdebele, SiSwati, Xitsonga and Tshivenda. The recent development has witnessed the inclusion of sign language as the twelfth official language after the amendment of the section 6 of the Constitution of the Republic of South Africa, 1996 as per the Constitution Eighteenth Amendment Bill of 2023 [37]. The diverse official languages are in recognition of the multicultural and multilingual nature of the country which manifests itself in citizens frequently mixing these languages in speech and writing [38]. On this issue of languages, the Constitution of South Africa further states:

- 1) All citizens of this country have equal rights, including the right to be served by government in their own language.
- 2) All citizens in South Africa have equal rights to all opportunities, including the opportunity to develop themselves and their communities through education, health, housing, arts and culture, as well as access to the infrastructure of a modern society.
- 3) All people in South Africa have a right to develop themselves and the members of their community in the official South African languages of their choice [36: sections 6, 9, 16, 29, 32].

The task of serving citizens in their languages is largely delegated to provincial governments and their municipalities who should consider the "the language needs, usage and preferences of the population" [36, sections 3(a) and 3(b)]. However, provinces would still identify English and Afrikaans alongside African languages as their official languages. For instance, the KwaZulu-Natal (KZN Provincial Language Policy [39, section 2.1.1], identifies isiZulu, isiXhosa, English and Afrikaans as its official languages. More so, English would tend to be the official language of administration that would be used for publications (KZN

Provincial Language Policy [39, section 2.4.5.3]. Webb [40] viewed the constitution's stand on multilingualism in the form of 11 official languages as an indication of avoidance and vagueness. The South African government, like most African leaders, was avoiding committing itself to one national language which would be African [41]. Moreover, lack of clarity on the implementation plan through the use of vague terms [40]. This tendency has also been found to be evident in some of the institutions in the country. Maseko and Siziba [42] find that most universities' language policies, especially the North-West University and Stellenbosch University, are vague and adopt escapist strategies on the development of African languages which they marginalize by placing conditions on their usage in education whilst perpetuating the dominance of English and Afrikaans. Such practices contribute to the institutionalization of ex-colonial languages, especially English, which continue to dominate education, politics and the economy whilst marginalizing African languages [43, 44].

The recognition of African languages' worth in the Constitution was further cemented in educational policies of South Africa. These were specifically the Bill of Rights in the Constitution [36, sections 30 and 31] which assures citizens that they have the right 'to receive education in the official languages or language of their choice where that is practicable' (paragraph 3.1.2). The concern noted above as raised by Webb [40] about the use of vague and non-committal terms is apparent in the use of "where that is practicable". Hence, it would not be surprising to find that the language policies are also developed in the same fashion. The two policies derived from the Constitution that require scrutiny are the Department of Education [45] Language-in- Education Policy (LiEP) for schools and the Department of Higher Education and Training [46] Language Policy for Higher Education (LPHE).

Firstly, the LiEP [45] begins by boldly stating that it seeks "to promote multilingualism" (1.2.1) that would assist "facilitate communication across the barriers of color" (1.2.3). This would be done by maintaining "home language(s) while providing access to and the effective acquisition of additional language(s)" (para. 1.2.5). However, the policy makes it clear that "the language of learning and teaching is vested on the individual" (paragraph 1.2.6) who "must choose the language" (para. 3.4.2). On the one hand, the policy instructs the use of home language from grade 1 to 3. On the other, from grade 4 parents can choose the language of instruction for their children. This is what Makena and Matiso [47] refer to as the sudden transition from the known to the unknown language leading to many Africans struggling academically because they cannot cope with the use of the ex-colonial language in education [31]. Posel and Casale [48] argue that it is due to this language option in the policy that many African parents are choosing English because of the perception that it is critical for employment and for use as an international language.

Secondly, the LPHE (2002) equally acknowledges the damage caused by "English and Afrikaans as the dominant [ex-colonial] languages of instruction" (15.1) in as far as not supportive of "the majority of [African] students entering higher education" (5) as they deny them "access and success" (5). However, the LPHE surprisingly require that African languages should still be developed as media of instruction "alongside English and Afrikaans" (21). Interestingly, the Language Policy Framework for Public Higher Education Institution (DHET, [49, pp. 12-13], the revised version of the LPHE 2002, acknowledges that not enough has been done "to avoid racial discrimination, unjust exclusion" of African students and calls on universities "to value all indigenous languages as sources of knowledge". This is in line with the concern raised by Makalela [50, pp. 150-151], who is critical of the lack of political will

by universities to implement policies which end up gathering dust giving ex-colonial languages a vantage point over African languages. Similarly, Cele [51] does not mince words in stating that the policy implementation process has failed to bring about transformation and social inclusion. This lack of implementation can be attributed to university leaders who have ignored policy from the government. It is therefore important that universities adopt a transformative approach when it comes to policy implementation [52].

#### 4.2 Lesotho

Historically, Lesotho has been considered a monolingual country, with Sesotho, a language used by the majority of the population, giving the country this monolingual status [53, 54]. However, it suffices to mention that following Lesotho's independence from Britain in 1966, Lesotho officially became a bilingual country, with Sesotho, a native language, and English, a coloniser's language, both awarded the status of being official languages [55, 56]. The Constitution of Lesotho, Section 3(1) boldly states that these two languages are declared official and that any official document that is presented in any of the two languages should be considered valid [57].

In the same token, the revision of the language policy in 2009 by the Ministry of Education and Training (MOET) saw both Sesotho and English being used as mediums of instruction in schools at different levels, with the former used from Grade 1 to Grade 3 and the latter from Grade 4 up to the tertiary level [58]. Nevertheless, Kolobe and Matsoso [56] posit that the Curriculum and Assessment Policy (CAP) document insists that mother tongue should be used as a medium of instruction from Grade 1 to Grade 3, and that erroneously, this statement was interpreted by many to be referring to Sesotho as being the mother tongue. Indeed, the revision of the policy in 2009 through CAP duly recognises the existence of other languages spoken by minority groups such as IsiPhuthi, IsiXhosa and IsiNdebele, which are seen to give Lesotho a linguistic and cultural variance that was previously overlooked. However, the minority languages are not currently used as mediums of instruction despite the fact that Lesotho's strategic plan of 2005-2015 by the [59] reiterates that children from minority groups would cease to be marginalised in order to afford them access to knowledge in their mother tongue. Kolobe and Matsoso [56], in their study, aver that only Sesotho is used as a medium of instruction, and this suggests that the other three ethnic languages are side-lined, thereby compromising the quality of education offered to learners.

The revision of the language policy once again in 2019 should be seen as an attempt to remedy the mishap regarding the misconception of the 2009 CAP and to (re)construct Lesotho, in the post-colonial era, such that it recognizes minority groups. The MOET [60, pp. 2] states that:

A recent diagnostic language situation in Lesotho reflects a definite existence of IsiXhosa, Sephuthi and IsiNdebele ethnic languages in the rural areas of the mountainous Kingdom of Lesotho.

This quote suggests that the Lesotho Education Language Policy (LELP) is a step towards ensuring that other minority languages are included in the school curriculum in view of promoting access to education and effective communication whilst instigating dialogues that push for the officialising of these languages in Lesotho [60]. Nevertheless, despite MOET's efforts to bolster the use of the ethnic languages and to restore their dominance,

recent studies [55, 56] paint a different picture. Kolobe and Matsoso [56] insist that English remains a pre-eminent language that is seen as a language of prestige. This latter assertion was earlier posited by Kamwangamalu [53], who indicated that English is viewed as the language of power, status and the language of the elite. In addition, Kamwangamalu [53] postulates that parents in Lesotho preferred English over Sesotho as the medium of instruction even in the lower grades, as the latter is not seen to have economic value in the linguistic sphere. In the same line of thought, Makumane and Fru [55, pp. 14,15] attest that learners in their study were of the view that English is “an advancement tool that can be used for better prospects [...] and makes them feel part of an educated citizenry as English is considered a marker of education in Lesotho”.

## **5. Discussion**

South Africa and Lesotho were subjected to colonialism and linguistic oppression by two colonizers. For South Africa, it was the Dutch and the English. For Lesotho, it was the French and the English. In both instances, the English won, and their language still dominates despite independence and democracy for the two countries. This should however be understood in the context where English has established itself as global and national language of communication with a strong footprint in the economy and digital space. Language planning and status planning have enabled the countries to make efforts in freeing themselves from the linguistic bondage of colonialism. Policies are firm on bringing about nationalism but ideological practices fueled by ambiguities in policies perpetuate the dominance of English.

The constitution of South Africa promotes multilingualism across all spheres of governance in recognition of various languages in the country which is in line with its multilingual nature. Yet, there is some contradiction when the education policies either limit the period of mother tongue education or are vague on implementation strategies that should enforce multilingualism. Lesotho is in a better position to implement nationalism in society and in education due to the dominance of one African language across the country. However, the approach taken by politicians was to settle for bilingualism in which English was put on par with Sesotho. Furthermore, French and a limited number of minority languages are promoted in education. This is a gesture, like in South Africa, that promotes multilingualism and recognizes Lesotho’s rich multi-cultural heritage.

## **6. Conclusions**

Both countries are applauded for their efforts to promote linguistic reconstruction and nationalism policies in their post-independence era. Whilst these policies might not be firm on required changes, implementation strategies and practices in their societies appear to move towards nationalism and multilingualism. This is even though some pockets of society, including leaders, are struggling to decolonise their minds. There is hope that Africa would one day be totally free of colonialism. Lesotho is likely to emerge as the early winner because of the already dominant use of Sesotho across many parts of the kingdom. The bit of a challenge is in the capital Maseru where English is to some extent dominant among citizens. South Africa might, like Tanzania, make progress if it settles for isiZulu because of its popularity not only in South Africa but also among some Lesotho citizens due to closeness of the two countries.

**Conflicts of Interest:** The authors declare no conflict of interest.



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**Citation:** Ngcobo, S.; Makumane, M.A.; Masala, P. The linguistic reconstruction of African nations: a case of post-colonial South Africa and Lesotho. *Journal of Social Sciences* 2023, 6 (4), pp. 90-101. [https://doi.org/10.52326/jss.utm.2023.6\(4\).08](https://doi.org/10.52326/jss.utm.2023.6(4).08).

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