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Book Review

African Languages and Language Practice Research in the 21st Century: Interdisciplinary Themes and Perspectives
by Monwabisi K. Ralarala, Ken Barris, Eunice Ivala, and Sibawu Siyepu (Editors). Cape Town, South Africa: CASAS, 2017. 378 pp.
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An important book in the research of African languages, *African Languages and Language Practice Research in the 21st Century: Interdisciplinary Themes and Perspectives* (henceforth, *the book*), was recently published by *The Centre for Advanced Studies of African Society (CASAS)*. The book addresses the terrible legacy of colonial oppression in which colonial languages devalued the social status of African languages. Loomba reminds us that the ending of colonial rule was not a once-off event because “unequal relations of colonial rule have been re-inscribed in the contemporary imbalances between, ‘first’ and ‘third’ world nations. The new global order does not depend upon direct rule” (2005, p. 12)—and that it is “more helpful to think of postcolonialism not just as coming literally after colonialism and signifying its end, but more flexibly as the contestation of colonial domination and the legacies of colonialism” (2005, p. 16).

All colonised countries were dominated by subtractive bilingualism⁶ that diminished the use of indigenous languages in all important social domains. This book, which is wholly devoted to African languages, gives a fresh view on how to develop African languages in an additive linguistic environment by advocating their effective use in all important social domains. In this regard, it is, to my knowledge, one of the few books that tackle the depressing legacy of colonialism for African languages.

The objective of the book is realised in three main sections that are presented in its introduction as follows:

[The sections convey] seemingly disparate yet interconnected themes: (i) language and pedagogy; (ii) language policy, planning and practice activities; as well as (iii) language in the professional context. These themes are united in that they all concern access to

⁶ Cummins (1976) pointed out that subtractive bilingualism obtains in a linguistic situation where the second language is added and overpowers the first language, or diminishes its status. Additive bilingualism is the opposite of subtractive bilingualism—it develops the status of the first and second languages. See, for example, the significance of additive bilingualism in higher education in Ndimande-Hlongwa and Ndebele (2017), and its management in institutions of higher education in Ndebele and Zulu (2017).

resources and issues of social justice. There is a border along which individual human lives encounter the state. This border runs necessarily through education, social responsibility, health care and law, as it does through other areas. (p. xii)

Section One has six chapters. Xeketwana's study is about using printed media as a resource for developing academic literacy in higher education. Mayaba's study concentrates on teaching African languages to foundation phase teacher trainees whose primary language is not an African language. Other studies (by Millar & Barris; Ngcobo; Rodrigues & Abrahams; and Sebolai) examine negative language attitudes by students of higher education. The students' negative attitudes about African languages being too inferior to be used in "high" domains of society, stem from *linguicism*⁷ (Phillipson, 1992; Skutnabb-Kangas, 1988) and are not congruent with academic evidence that one learns better in one's primary language (Alexander, 2005; Bamgbose, 2011; Batibo, 2014; Brock-Utne, 2006).

In Section Two, Matlhaku's study shows that "one noticeable outcome of the co-existence of English and Setswana in Botswana is the conspicuous influx of borrowings into Setswana which has continued to grow extensively to date" (p. 139). Mojapelo and Masubelele's study shows the "need for a linguistics terminology database in the African languages" (p. 185), and Jadezweni and Mfazwe-Mojapelo's study shows that the translation of English taboo words and phrases into isiXhosa can empower African languages. Other studies in the section (Maseko, Dhlamini, & Ncube, Nkomo & Maseko, and Kretzer) explore what is often known as *linguistic hegemony* (Alexander, 2005) in Africa—a situation that obtains in linguistic situations where the status of some languages is diminished, whilst other languages are made dominant.

Studies in this section show that the dominance of some African languages over other African languages differs from country to country because the dynamics of African language usage are dictated by different ideologies at work. Bamgbose (2011, p. 1) noted:

Although they [African languages] were a minority, they wielded a lot of power, based on the monopoly of the control of the language of colonial occupation. Even after independence, such languages remained official languages in most countries.

Bamgbose (2011, p. 1) rightly observed that the "actors responsible for [language domination in Africa] are in part historical, linguistic, economic and socio-political."

Section Three of the book focuses on language use in various professional contexts. Docrat, Kaschula, and Ralarala's study critiques how the South African criminal justice system deals with the question of language in a multilingual and democratic country. Docrat's own study focuses on law, and the challenges of implementing language rights within the framework of South African law. Sabao's study recommends the use of African language newspapers in classrooms because their language structure is authentic. Makamani's study examines the nature of poor communication between healthcare workers and patients in three selected hospitals in Windhoek, Namibia, because of the scarcity of trained interpreters. Matiza's study argues that development in the African languages can be enhanced by non-verbal communication in dances, and recommends the didactic principles of theatre for language development.

To conclude, perhaps *African Languages and Language Practice Research in the 21st Century: Interdisciplinary Themes and Perspectives* can be seen as advocating bringing African languages from

⁷ Linguicism refers to the unfair treatment of a person, or a group of people with common identity, based solely on the language spoken by the person(s).

the margins of colonial relegation to the respectable linguistic centres of post-colonial Africa. Further, the book empowers the once disempowered people of Africa and their languages; but it is also a voice that says that, in postcolonial Africa, African languages should occupy spaces of development and active use.

The book is highly recommended as resource material in higher education language practice and research because it is one of the few academic books in this field that focus wholly on researching the languages previously marginalised by colonial rule in Africa.

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