

Vehicular Cross-Border Languages, Multilingualism and the African Integration Debate: A Decolonial Epistemic Perspective



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ABSTRACT

The proposition that African vehicular cross-border languages are best positioned to facilitate African integration is underpinned by a hegemonic and colonial philosophy that misdirects the African multilingual debate. This becomes apparent when the perceived utility of this category of languages is considered against the backdrop of contestations surrounding language definition traditions and the incidence of language multiversity in Africa¹. Drawing on the ideas of decolonial scholarship from the Global South, this article provides a critical analysis of African vehicular cross-border languages and perceptions about their ability to resolve the anticipated intercultural communication problems of an integrated Africa. The article seeks to bring to the limelight some of the fundamental omissions and blind spots of such projective conclusions about the potential of vehicular cross-border languages and how such projections are shaped by dominant, neo-liberal and conservative language ideologies and ideologies of (or about) language.

Keywords: African regional integration, cross-border languages, ideology, decolonial thought, intercultural communication

1. INTRODUCTION

In this article I look at the question of African vehicular cross-border languages from the perspective of decolonial thought, a social-theoretical framework pioneered by Latin American and other like-minded thinkers from the Global South, including Walter D. Mignolo (2000, 2002, 2006 and 2011); Anibal Quijano (1998 and 2000); Ramón Grosfoguel (2005, 2006 and 2008); and Enrique Dussel (1995 and 1998), among others. I have previously argued elsewhere (see Ndhlovu 2011 and 2013) in support of the use of cross-border languages as vehicles for African economic and political integration. My position on this potential of cross-border languages has not necessarily changed because I still believe that, like all other languages and language forms and practices of the African people, cross-border languages have a place in the ongoing African integration debate. However, the influence from decolonial scholarship has prompted me to adopt a rather cautious and less optimistic view of cross-border languages and their ability to provide a genuine departure from the imperialistic and hegemonic manipulation

of standard languages by political elites to achieve skewed nation building projects. As recent 21st century trends and developments are reminding us every day, the relevance of the nation-state as a unit of analysis in contemporary societies is now increasingly being challenged both from below and from above. From below, the nation-state is challenged by the increasing discontent and dissension of minority groups while forces of transnational human population movements constitute a nascent threat from above. Consequently, the 21st century African dream has dramatically shifted from the agenda of consolidating the sovereignty and separate development of individual nation-states to that of cultivating continental economic, cultural and political integration. African regional and sub-regional economic and political blocs are being promoted and propagated as building units for achieving total continental integration. One of the biggest challenges that come with these developments is that of cultivating intercultural communication, cross-linguistic understanding and social cohesion among the hitherto linguistically and culturally multiverse peoples of the African continent.

In its response to the anticipated intercultural communication challenges to successful African integration, the African Academy of Languages (Acalan), an arm of the African Union Social Affairs Commission, has projected vehicular cross-border languages (VCBL) as the means by which such problems could be resolved. Acalan (2009: 4) defines vehicular cross-border languages as ‘languages that are common to two or more states and domains straddling various usages’. The African language ecology is characterized by the existence of many examples of cross-border languages including Swahili in east and central African countries (Tanzania, Kenya, Uganda, Burundi, Rwanda, southern Somalia, Comoro, Democratic Republic of Congo, northern Mozambique and eastern and northern Malawi); Arabic in the entire north Africa and the Horn of Africa region (Egypt, Libya, Tunisia, Algeria, Morocco, Sudan, Mauritania, Chad, Djibout, Somalia and Eritrea); the Fulfulde cluster including sister language forms such as Fula, Pulaar, Peul, Tucolor, Fulful, Fulbe and Fulani in West Africa (Burkina Faso, Guinea-Bissau, Mali, Chad, Cameroon, Nigeria, Gambia, Senegal, Guinea, Mauritania and the Central African Republic); Nyanja/Chewa spoken in Malawi, Zambia, Zimbabwe and parts of northern Mozambique; Afrikaans and the Nguni and Sotho-Tswana clusters in much of the southern African region (mainly South Africa, Namibia, Botswana, Swaziland, Lesotho and Zimbabwe). The Fulfulde cluster is the largest group of cross-border languages, crossing more than 14 west African national borders (Prah 2009; Barro 2010).

From the above suite of cross-border languages, Acalan identified and recommended 12 VCBLs for prioritization in the African integration project. They include Chichewa/Chinyanja and Setswana (to be used in southern Africa); Kiswahili, Somali and Malgasy (to be used in east Africa); Fulfude, Mandenkan and Hausa (to be used in west Africa); (Modern Standard Arabic and Berbère (to be used in north Africa); and Lingala and Beti-fang (to be used in central Africa) (Acalan 2009). These vehicular cross-border languages are considered capable of serving the purpose of lingua franca among the African ethnolinguistic and cultural polities currently residing in different nation-states with different language practices and language policy regimes. However, as I argue in this paper, questions of African integration and intercultural communication are too complex to be resolved by recourse to vehicular cross-border languages alone. This complexity is further compounded by the very old and well known sociolinguistic question on the distinction between ‘language’ and ‘dialect’, as well as contestations around multilingualism and language

definition traditions. For example, there is often a tension between official versions and the accounts of speaking communities regarding what constitutes a language and whether the idea of mutual intelligibility among a constellation of linguistic forms within a given national/regional/continental space does make them separate languages or not.

The overarching argument of this article is that vehicular cross-border languages suffer from the same limitations as those currently besetting national languages in the sense that: (i) they are conceived as isomorphic, monolithic and countable entities that do not accommodate other language forms; (ii) for them to function transnationally, cross-border languages need to be subjected to the same corpus planning and standardisation processes that gave birth to standard national languages; (iii) they are contested and their cross-border status is defined in terms of existing nation-state boundaries that they purport to transcend. The article posits that on account of these and other related limitations, vehicular cross-border languages are not ideally suited to resolve the intercultural communication problems of an integrated Africa.

This article is organised into four sections as follows. The next section discusses the social-theoretical ideas of decolonial scholarship, which constitute the underpinning conceptual framework for the entire paper. This is followed by the third section that turns to critical analysis of the notions of multilingualism and plurilingualism, indicating where they meet and also collide with assumptions about vehicular cross-border languages vis-à-vis the African integration project. Drawing on insights from decolonial thought, section four extends further the discussion on African vehicular cross-border languages and brings to light the limitations of this category of languages in resolving intercultural communication problems of an integrated Africa. The article concludes with a brief section that distils the main arguments advanced.

2. THEORETICAL BACKGROUND: DECOLONIAL EPISTEMIC PERSPECTIVE

The argument of this article is underpinned by decolonial epistemic thinking, a perspective that questions traditional conceptualisations produced from the Global North² and calls for the recognition and mainstreaming of other knowledges and ways of engaging with knowledges, especially those from the Global South. Decolonial theorists criticise both the intellectual distortions of modernity and the concrete oppression brought by five hundred years of colonial domination. They ask the following crucial questions: Why is theory from the South at best seen as ‘postcolonial’ theory? And why is it likely that, when these issues are addressed, the person to expose them is rendered unscholarly and outdated? Is it possible to articulate a critical cosmopolitanism beyond nationalism and colonialism? Can we produce knowledge beyond third world and Eurocentric fundamentalisms? How can we overcome the Eurocentric modernity without throwing away the best of modernity as many of the third world fundamentalists do? (Grosfoguel 2009: 10). Therefore,

Through its unique take on power, knowledge, culture, history, human existence and globalization, [decolonial] thought aims at elaborating not just another paradigm within the typically modern way of thinking but a totally new paradigm that shatters such thinking ... (Banazak and Ceja, 2010: 113).

Decolonial epistemic theorists also argue that ‘race, gender, sexuality, spirituality, and epistemology are not additive elements to the economic and political structures of the capitalist world-system, but an integral, entangled and constitutive part of the entangled whole European modern/colonial capitalist world-system’ (Grosfoguel 2009: 20). According to Mignolo (2000), what is sought in decolonial thought is not only a change in contents of conversation but also a change of the limits and conditions of conversations. In other words, decolonial thought is not just concerned about the need for new ideas. Rather, it goes a step further to call for a completely new way of thinking – about languages, about cultural identities, about regimes of knowledge and knowledge production, and just about everything else we do. A key underpinning concept in decolonial scholarship is that of ‘coloniality’, which must be clearly distinguished from that of ‘colonialism’:

When they use the term “colonialism” decolonial thinkers are referring to a form of political domination with corresponding institutions; [and] when they use the term “coloniality” they are referring to something more important for them, a pattern of comprehensive and deep-reaching power spread throughout the world. In other words, colonialism has been one of the historical experiences constitutive of coloniality; but coloniality is not exhausted in colonialism, as it includes many other experiences and manifestations, which still operate in the present (Banazak and Ceja 2010: 115).

The important point highlighted in the above distinction between the concepts of ‘coloniality’ and ‘colonialism’ is this: even when the formal process of colonisation has come to an end, there still remains a form of power (coloniality) that produces, uses and legitimises differences between societies and forms of knowledge.

Another point worth explaining is that although decolonial thought is associated with scholars from postcolonial societies; the focus of coloniality is in many ways different from that of postcolonial studies. First, while postcolonial studies has always sought to problematize colonialism as a historical event, coloniality takes a much broader focus that problematizes colonial power as a continuum that transcends the colonial era and whose presence continues to influence and affect current social realities, including discourses of modernity, globalisation and universalism. Quijano (1999) explains the second distinction quite succinctly:

Coloniality is one of the specific and constitutive elements of global model of capitalist power It operates on every level, in every arena and dimension (both material and subjective) of everyday social existence, and does so on a societal scale. The concept of coloniality is distinct from, but bound up with, colonialism. The later refers strictly to a structure of domination/exploitation in which the control of political authority, productive resources, and labour of a population is held by someone of a different identity, and whose centre of government, moreover lies in another territorial jurisdiction Coloniality has [on the other hand] proven in the last 500 years to be deeper and long-standing than colonialism.

Banazak and Ceja (2010: 119) add another dimension to the distinction between the focus of coloniality and that of postcolonial studies by pointing out that coloniality speaks from the colonial difference that goes back to the 16th and 19th century Spanish and Portuguese colonisation of Latin America in the context of *early modernity*. Postcolonial thought, in contrast, relates

mainly to the 18th and 20th century colonisation of Africa and Asia by northern European powers (mainly France, Germany and England) in the context of *late modernity*. In short, the breadth and depth of coverage in decolonial thought are all-encompassing and much wider than that of postcolonial studies.

Anibal Quijano (2000 and 2007) further provides taxonomy of ‘coloniality’ as consisting of four strands, namely coloniality of power, coloniality of knowledge, coloniality of being, and coloniality of nature. This paper specifically utilizes insights from coloniality of power and coloniality of knowledge to unpack the underlying meanings of philosophies informing Acalan’s concept of African vehicular cross-border languages. In the subsequent parts of this section I elaborate on the key contours of the two notions and how they are deployed in illuminating the African language question vis-à-vis the African integration project.

Coloniality of power theorises interrelations of the practices and legacies of European colonialism in social orders and forms of knowledge. It describes the living legacy of colonialism in contemporary societies in the form of social discrimination that outlived formal colonialism and became integrated in succeeding social orders and behaviours (Quijano 2007). In his explication of the coloniality of power thesis, Ramón Grosfoguel begins with a critique of how globalisation studies, political economy paradigms and world-systems analysis have so far marginalised theoretical contributions from the Global South. Consequently the academy in the former colonial world has continued ‘to produce knowledge from the western man’s point zero god-eye view (Grosfoguel 2010: 17). He goes on to suggest that these epistemological paradigms are in need of decolonisation whereby the locus of enunciation (point of departure/worldview) moves away from the European man to the Latin American indigenous woman, for example. In a critical reflection on the African decolonisation project, Ndlovu-Gatsheni (2012: 73) uses the notion of coloniality of power to reveal how ‘African people are today entangled, woven and entrapped in the colonial matrix of power underpinning asymmetrically structured global social order’. He laments those African scholars who are oblivious to the ‘invisible hierarchies of ... linguistic and racial arrangements underpinning imperial global designs within which African struggles for decolonisation took place (ibid. 74).

Because the concept of coloniality of power enables critical thinking about how the legacy of colonialism continues to shape and influence the behaviours of former colonial outposts, I use it in this paper to question and challenge the epistemological foundations of the African integration project. I also use insights from coloniality of power thesis to support the argument that the notion of African vehicular cross-border languages reflects the continuation of global imperial power designs in which the idea of totality or homogeneity is celebrated in spite of its serious distortions to the multiverse language realities on the ground. The notion of coloniality of power also helps us arrive at the conclusion that African integration is, in fact, manifestation of the world-systems power structures in that it strives to approximate a mirror image of the European Union integration model. As I argue in the fourth section, this lays bare the banality of the entire rhetoric about African independence and sovereignty since the African integration agenda is driven by the exigencies of the same colonial power matrix that it purports to subvert.

The second strand of decolonial thought deployed in this paper is *coloniality of knowledge*. The remit of this strand is to problematise Eurocentric knowledge systems in which race is

seen as naturalisation of colonial relations between Europeans and non-Europeans. From this perspective, the Eurocentric system of knowledge is brought under spotlight for assigning the domain of knowledge production exclusively to Europeans and prioritising Eurocentric ways of knowledge valuation and knowledge production. This entails problematising the west as the logical starting point of valid and relevant theory, and as privileged site of knowledge production. ‘To speak of coloniality of knowledge is to speak of a key aspect of the colonial power matrix [and] our understanding of the world cannot limit itself to encompass only the occidental scientific renderings’ (Suárez-Krabbe 2009: 2). As Quijano (2000) writes:

Europe’s hegemony over the new model of global power concentrated all forms of the control of subjectivity, culture, and especially knowledge and the production of knowledge under its hegemony. This resulted in simultaneous denial of knowledge production to the conquered peoples and repression of traditional modes of knowledge production, on the basis of the superiority/inferiority relationship enforced by the hierarchical structure.

The coloniality of knowledge thesis posits that the western tradition of knowledge is only valid and useful for some ends; for others it is unworkable (Suárez-Krabbe 2009). The point of greater significance here is that we need to understand, acknowledge and also further develop other ways of creating meaning, knowledge and action.

I use the above insights from coloniality of knowledge thesis to support the argument that the ideology informing Acalan’s concept of vehicular cross-border languages proceeds from a western understanding of language as something that exists in standard form and is countable. As Grosfoguel (2009) points out, the most powerful fundamentalism today is the Eurocentric one because it succeeds in hiding its very nature by laying claim to the high-sounding but very deceptive idea of universality. I use this critique to bring to the limelight the complicity of the African academy in advancing the Euro-American knowledge regime as the sole epistemic tradition from which to understand questions of language and identity. Using the concept of coloniality of knowledge this paper suggests that Acalan’s failure to realise that ‘vehicular cross-border language’ is a Eurocentric concept places this organisation in the position of coloniser with best intentions, to borrow Enrique Dussel’s cliché (1995).

3. A NOTE ON AFRICAN MULTILINGUALISM: ASSUMPTIONS AND BLIND SPOTS

Multilingualism has in recent years become a buzz word in public, political and scholarly debates and discourses in many linguistically and culturally multiverse societies. It has come to represent and to be equated with best practices in many social and educational policy areas such bi-(multi-)lingual education; social inclusion; immigrant social service provision; regional and continental integration; active citizenship participation; and inclusive education. However, there still remain grey and contested areas around the meanings and understandings of African multilingualism in particular. There is often lack of clarity, both in theory and in practice, on the subtle but very crucial distinction between the notion of multilingualism and that of plurilingualism.

A 2009 European Union *Study on the Contribution of Multilingualism to Creativity* is among the few scholarly documents that provide clarity on the distinction between the often erroneously conflated notions of ‘multilingualism’ and ‘plurilingualism’. Multilingualism is conceived as referring to ‘the presence of several languages in a given space, independently of those who use them The fact that two languages are present in the same geographical area does not indicate whether inhabitants know both languages, or one’ (European Union 2009: 3). On the other hand, plurilingualism is defined as

the ability to use languages for the purposes of communication and to take part in intercultural action, where a person, viewed as a social agent, has proficiency, of varying degrees, in several languages and experience of several cultures. This ability is concretised in the repertoire of languages a speaker can use (ibid. 3).

With specific reference to the Australian context, Clyne (2005: 27) employs the terms ‘multilingualism’ and ‘plurilingualism’ generally ‘for the use of more than two languages, and the use of more than one language respectively’. He further elaborates that plurilingualism only defines the use of languages and the ability to communicate in them, not a proficiency level and that plurilinguals often need both (or all of) their languages to express their multiple identity (Clyne 2005).

There is no doubt that the above definitions betray a rather problematic and limited conception of languages as monolithic and enumerable entities. (Please refer to the next section for more detailed discussion of the problems associated with such an understanding of languages.) This limitation notwithstanding, the above distinction between ‘multilingualism’ and ‘plurilingualism’ is significant as it clarifies the fact that it is the individual’s linguistic competence skills (and not the presence of many languages in a given space) that is thought to lead to positive outcomes. Plurilingual competence skills ‘enable the individual to develop an enriched, more complex personality and an enhanced capacity for further language learning and greater openness to new cultural experiences’ (Council of Europe 2009: 43).

Therefore, in order to ascertain whether African vehicular cross-border languages can really resolve the intercultural communication problems of an integrated Africa, we need to subject them to the plurilingual communicative competence acid test. Pluralism

calls to mind a pattern in which different groups are given the possibility, and perhaps, a certain support, to maintain their distinctive characters without the coercive and defense mechanisms usually associated with segregation (Allwood, 1985).

We, therefore, need to ask a number of difficult questions about whether vehicular cross-border languages can indeed promote the ability of African societies, institutions, groups and individuals to engage on a regular basis in plurilingual ways. The following are some of the contending questions about cross-border languages and multilingualism discourses that have so far received inadequate attention from both research scholarship and policy perspectives: What language ideologies and ideologies of (or about) language underwrite the concept of vehicular cross-border language from a policy perspective and from an academic practitioner’s perspective? What political-economic conditions are feeding into and sustaining the ongoing

multilingualism discourse in Africa, including those discourses that inform ideas on vehicular cross-border languages? Whose interests are served by the multilingualism discourse in the African integration debate? What are the assumptions and blind spots of multilingualism as a discourse and as a policy framework for African integration? What prospects, possibilities and opportunities does African multilingualism present beyond current popular and dominant iterations bordering on the use of vehicular cross-border languages as communication tools across cultures? What does the African multilingual discourse projected through vehicular cross-border languages reveal and hide about languages? What are the unintended consequences of conflating and even interchangeably using the concepts of multilingualism and plurilingualism? Given the multiverse nature of African ethnolinguistic polities, from which group's interests are vehicular cross-border languages conceived? Whose intercultural communication needs are they envisaged to serve?

Admittedly, these are all hard questions that implicate and invite the enduring challenges associated with trying to strike a balance between language policy and politics in African and other comparable multilingual countries in the world. These difficulties notwithstanding, we will attempt to address most of these questions in the next section.

4. VEHICULAR CROSS-BORDER LANGUAGES AND AFRICAN INTEGRATION

Acalan's proposition of the concept of African vehicular cross-border languages appears to be on a collision course with a plurilingualistic view of African integration. African vehicular cross-border languages are conceived in a manner that does not set them apart from African national languages, which are now well known for being the worst killer languages in postcolonial Africa. Almost all 12 vehicular cross-border languages prioritised by the African Academy of Languages are the national languages of at least two African nation-states. For example, Chichewa/Chinyanja is the national language of Malawi and Zambia; Setswana is the sole national language of Botswana; KiSwahili is the official national language of Tanzania and is one of the national languages of Kenya; and both Arabic and Beberé are the de facto national languages of most north African nation-states. What this simply means is that the prioritisation of cross-border languages amounts to change without a difference. The same hegemonic languages that were used for administrative convenience and for fashioning 'imagined' uniform identities by both the colonial and postcolonial African nation-state would continue to be appropriated for similar purposes by a trans-national African state. The only two things that have changed are (1) the naming of this category of languages which changes from 'national language' to 'vehicular cross-border language' and (2) expansion of the spatial jurisdiction of each of the selected languages – i.e. from national boundaries to trans-national/regional boundaries. In other words, the terminology of 'vehicular cross-border language' is another metaphor for territorial conquest by current African national languages that gives them more political clout.

In its December 2011 Quarterly Newsletter, the African Academy of Languages indicates that it has already established Vehicular Cross-border Language (VCBL) commissions for all the selected cross-border languages with the exception of Modern Standard Arabic and Berbère. The language commissions are charged with the responsibility of spearheading and coordinating

harmonisation of writing systems for the selected VCBLs as well as organising regional training and capacity building workshops in areas of language standardisation and other related corpus planning activities. The Chichewa/Chinyanja and Setswana Language commissions held their first workshop on the harmonisation of these vehicular cross-border languages in Gaborone, Botswana in May 2011 (Acalan 2011). In October of the same year, Acalan organised a capacity building workshop for the Cinyanja/Chichewa, Mandenkan and Somali Vehicular Cross-border Language commissions in Lusaka, Zambia. The capacity building workshops sought to:

Create a common ground for the harmonisation of the activities of the Vehicularcross-border Language Commissions in relation to the development and promotion of African languages in general and the vehicular cross-border languages in particular. (1) Build the capacity of the vehicular cross-border Language Commissions for optimal performance and define strategies for advocacy, project management, monitoring and evaluation as well as fund raising. (2) Prepare and adopt a draft binding and working document on the functioning of the vehicular cross-border Language Commissions (Acalan 2011: 17).

It is important to recall that the choice of African vehicular cross-border languages was mainly motivated by the desire to circumvent the use of ex-colonial languages such as English, French and Portuguese, that are perceived as foreign and, therefore, incapable of adequately representing a truly African worldview. By virtue of their African indigenous language status, VCBLs are perceived as better positioned to serve the desired goals of the African integration project. However, I must point out that the methodological and conceptual processes of promoting and propagating VCBLs constitute wholesale mimicry of the very same processes that pushed ex-colonial languages and other African national languages to the hegemonic positions that they currently enjoy. What the above description of the work of Vehicular Cross-border Language commissions shows is that the elevation of VCBLs into languages of African integration follows precisely the same route that elevated African national languages into objects of subtle cultural oppression that they are now notoriously well known for. The methodology underpinning the operational procedures of the commissions is purely colonial and is driven by monolingual language definition traditions that consider languages to be isomorphic forms that should always be subjected to rigorous corpus planning activities (development of standard grammars and orthographies) in preparation for deployment in such important domains as economic and political integration.

Another important point worth mentioning is that Acalan's enumeration of 12 VCBLs misdirects and misrepresents the notion of multilingualism in the sense that the counting of multiple standardised languages equates to what could be termed 'multiple monolingualisms', which does not necessarily translate into meaningful recognition of the multiversity of African ethnolinguistic polities. What is being missed by such an understanding of multilingualism is that the issue is not so much about the 'number' of such 'objects' accommodated into the African integration project. Rather, of greater significance is how such entities are conceptualised. Multilingualism should be understood as a concept that encompasses multiple and diverse views on lects, language forms and other communicative modes including symbolic, metaphorical and discursive ones. African understandings of the notion of language are more complex and broader in the sense that they encompass any or all of the following: dialect continua, cultural practices and identities, discursive practices, traditions, customs, social relationships, connections to the

land and nature, religion, spirituality, worldviews and philosophies, proverbial lore, and so on. In other words, the concept of language does not always refer to a noun; it can be an action word or even a describing word. Seen in this light, the concept of vehicular cross-border languages tends to misdirect African multilingualism insofar as it threatens to provide a misleading solution to the intercultural communication challenges of an integrated Africa. Acalan's adoption of the Eurocentric model of multilingualism, which can be well explained in decolonial terms, is thus anachronistic to African understandings of language and plurilingualism.

The epistemological paradigms informing Acalan's views about languages and their categorisation can be further explained by recourse to Anibal Quijano's ideas (1999: 8) on coloniality of power:

It is essential that we continue to investigate and debate the implications of the epistemological paradigm of the relation between the whole and its parts as this relates to socio-historical existence. Eurocentrism has led virtually the whole world to accept the idea that within a totality, the whole has absolute determinant primacy over all of the parts, and that therefore there is one and only one logic that governs behaviour of the whole and all of the parts. The possible variants in the movement of the parts are secondary, as they do not effect the whole and are recognized as particularities within the general rule or logic of the whole to which they belong.

This quote captures clearly the homogenising ideology behind vehicular cross-border languages and other standard language forms, which are often erroneously considered to be constituted by mutually intelligible lects. It is informative to note that most of such standard African languages are a colonial invention and an imposition that were later embraced by postcolonial African regimes for purposes of political control, manipulation and cultural normalization. All other language forms were and continue to be considered as constituent parts of standard languages. This idea dates back to the colonial period where the role of early Christian missionaries in aiding colonial administrators in the project of inventing standard African national languages is well documented in the relevant literature³. Focusing on 'language' as a problematic concept, Pennycook (2008) provides a compelling argument on the historical evolution of standard 'languages' and how they have come to be simplistically accepted as national identity markers. For Pennycook, the point is to ask why it is that certain forms of 'language' (in this case standard vehicular cross-border languages) have come to play such a dominant role not only in shaping individual and group identities but in shaping the discipline of linguistics and its preoccupations. He looks at the historical and contemporary interests behind the long construction of things called 'languages' and asks in whose interests we continue to divide and categorize 'languages' into these named entities. In his response to this paradox, Pennycook (2008: 19 -21) argues:

[N]early all language-names have had to be invented by Europeans [and] are founded on words which have received English citizenship ... While others are based on existing names of countries and nationalities. while it is interesting at one level to observe simply that the names for these entities were invented, the point of greater significance is that these were not just new names for extant objects (language pre-existed naming), but rather the invention and naming of new objects. The naming performatively called languages into being.

In the above quotation Pennycook shows that the much celebrated ‘languages’ (including cross-border languages) were called into existence in much the same way that the Biblical God called the universe into being in the creation story. Citing the work of Lelyveld (1993) on Indian languages, Pennycook (2008: 19) goes on to observe that the invention of languages has to be seen in the context of the larger colonial archive of knowledge where ‘an ideology of languages as separate, autonomous objects in the world, things that could be classified, arranged, and deployed as media of exchange’ was developed. In this context, standardized ‘languages became a foundation for scientific knowledge and tradition built from data transmitted to Europeans by native experts’ (Lelyveld 1993, cited in Pennycook 2008: 20). This is precisely what colonial linguists and colonial administrators did in their invention of languages, tribes and tribalism in much of colonial southern Africa. For instance, in the context of Southern Rhodesia (present day Zimbabwe), Clement M. Doke⁴ did much of the calling into existence and naming of languages through his much acclaimed 1928–1931 project on the unification of Shona dialects. In his own words, Doke (1931: iii) recounts his methodology as follows:

Natives were placed at my disposal [by native commissioners and missionaries] for investigations, and information was most readily supplied.

An impression was created that this was a project in which native speakers of the entities that were later christened as languages had input into their evolution. However, it becomes apparent that this was just a charade as most of the so-called natives were simply selected to give legitimacy to an already carefully choreographed project of invented language ideologies and ideologies about language. As one decolonial theorist, Boaventura de Sousa Santos (2007: 9), explains, ‘in the realm of knowledge, appropriation ranges from the use of locals as guides and the use of local myths and ceremonies as instruments’ of inventing particular social and cultural identities. To this effect, Woolard (2004) cited in Pennycook (2008: 21) argues that ‘linguistic ideologies are never just about language, but rather also concern such fundamental notions as community, nation, and humanity itself’. As Romaine (1994: 12) points out in relation to Papua New Guinea, the ‘very concept of discrete languages is probably a European cultural artefact fostered by procedures such as literacy and standardization. Any attempt to count distinct languages will be an artefact of classificatory procedures rather than a reflection of communicative practices.’ The problematic nature of the concept of ‘language’ as a countable and enumerable entity is further elaborated by Pennycook (2008: 20):

At the heart of the problem here is the underlying ideology of accountability and singularity, reinforced by assumptions of a singular, essentialized language-object situated and physically located in concepts of space founded on a notion of territorialization. The idea of linguistic enumerability and singularity is based on the dual notions of both languages and speakers of those languages being amenable to counting.

It is precisely this logic that informs Acalan’s notion of African vehicular cross-border languages wherein the multiverse African language forms are assumed to be contained within the totality of VCBLs. This line of thinking about languages can be explained in decolonial terms. Furthermore, the above argument problematising concepts of space and territorialisation speaks directly to issues of the nation-state and those who reside in them vis-a-vis questions

of what constitutes a ‘language’ and the emblematic as well as cognitive linkages between languages and national identities. Essentially, the point is that we must not overlook both the problematic history of the construction of languages and the 19th to 20th century interests behind their enumeration and naming. The history of the co-construction of African national languages and the European colonial project of carving African national boundaries is well known and documented in the relevant literature⁵. In a similar fashion, vehicular cross-border languages are being co-constructed with imaginations of an integrated trans-national Africa. Seen from a decolonial epistemic perspective, this is emblematic of the colonial power matrix that continues to inform and shape understandings about languages and their linkages with group and individual identities.

As such, vehicular cross-border languages can be viewed as constituting another source of power for disciplining, punishing, normalizing and imprisoning diverse polities into the narrow cultural and linguistic norms of hegemonic forces. Of particular salience in the African context is the ‘re-naming’ and ‘re-development’ of standardised ‘languages’ whose origins date back to and coincide with the onset of colonialism. Here, the notion of languages, conceptions of ‘linguageness’ and their associated metalanguages that describe them are brought under the spotlight. Is there any material essence, for example, in ‘Setswana’, ‘Fulfulde’, ‘Mandenkan’, or ‘Chichewa’ as languages? To what extent do these monolithic and ontological nomenclatures represent the multiple identity narratives of all who live in the states and polities where they are spoken? There is copious literature indicating that these African languages elevated to the status of vehicular cross-border languages also have a chequered and tainted historical association with postcolonial projects of subtle cultural oppression and other forms of everyday language-based marginalisation. With specific reference to Chichewa (one of the VCBLs for southern Africa), Moyo (2002) gives a detailed analysis of how the promotion and propagation of this language by the first President of postcolonial Malawi, Kamuzu Banda, and his Malawi Congress Party resulted in the demise of multilingualism in the country. Moyo demonstrates how the Chewa dialect of Chinyanja, which happened to be Kamuzu Banda’s dialect, was on 21 September 1968 elevated to the position of the only national language of Malawi:

The Chewa dialect of Chinyanja was now promoted and became a symbol of national language. The language was decreed as the sole national language for mass communication on the radio and printed media. It also came to symbolize his [Banda’s] project of national unification and integration, linguistically and culturally. This was at the expense of seven other indigenous languages (Moyo 2002: 265).

It can be seen from the above quotation that Chichewa, which was primarily part of the Chinyanja dialect continua, was elevated to a national language because it was the President’s own lect. To elaborate on this point, Moyo cites Mchombo (2000) who states that ‘with the elevation of the Chichewa dialect to a national language came the rise of the Chewa [people] to political power, while the political power of other groups declined’ (Mchombo, cited in Moyo 2002: 265). As a result, Chewa values came to be exalted as supreme over the languages, cultures and traditions of other ethnic groups. In Malawi, class interests eventually came to affect social, linguistic, economic and political imbalances at national level.

As this article argues, national languages, of which VCBLs are an integral part, can be seen as semiotic social inventions used to make other language practices invisible by projecting an impression of uniformity in the midst of social, cultural, political and linguistic multiversity. In other words, the idea of standard national language serves to invisibilise and diminish the value of multiple language forms and expressions that fall outside the normatively constructed standard forms. It is the same national languages invented during the heydays of colonial and postcolonial nation-state formation processes that are currently being projected as the best vehicles for African integration. What a classic and colossal example of history repeating itself! It is here that the decolonial epistemic philosophy becomes clearly relevant as it reveals in unequivocal terms that there is really nothing new, novel and progressive about the idea behind the commissioning of African vehicular cross-border languages. What is it that the idea of vehicular cross-border languages brings to the table of ideas about languages and philosophies of languages? Apart from merely extending the geographical extent of the selected standard languages beyond the confines of individual nation-states, there are no concrete theoretical and empirical contributions that the notion of vehicular cross-border languages brings to the African multilingualism and identity discourse. Just like the current African national languages, vehicular cross-border languages are constituted and imagined as countable ontological objects, the only difference being that the geographical area for VCBLs is much wider. The entire project amounts to repetition without difference insofar as it is bereft of original and innovative thinking about ‘languages’ beyond the Euro-American versions of languages as enumerable monolithic forms. Both the constitution of vehicular cross-border languages and the *modus operandi* of Vehicular Cross-border Language commissions are founded on this false premise. In a seminal work on abyssal lines, abyssal thinking and ecologies of knowledges, De Sousa Santos (2007: 10) says:

The colonies provided a model of radical exclusion that prevails on modern Western thinking and practice today as it did during the colonial cycle. Today as then, both the creation and the negation of the other side of the line [the marginalised and invisibilised] is constitutive of hegemonic principles and practices. Today as then, the impossibility of co-presence between the two sides of the line runs supreme.

Drawing on these ideas we can argue that the intersection of language and the African integration project is a complicated and multifaceted issue that interweaves colonial processes of manipulation and control as well as postcolonial and postnational political goals of nation building, cross-cultural integration and identity formation. The current postnational African nation building enterprise (marketed as continental integration) is pre-eminently reinforcement and carryover from where the colonial and postcolonial language-based social engineering processes left. In other words, while the objective of promoting standardized language forms (national languages) during the colonial and postcolonial periods was ‘marketed as a program of enhancing administrative convenience, the same process is now being popularized as part of a response to the exigencies of “globalisation”, “progress” and “modernization”’ in the context of the postnational dispensation. However, the common denominator in all three cases is that of control, manipulation, subtle cultural oppression and indeed linguistic imperialism (Ndhlovu, 2009: 144). Decolonial scholarship helps illuminate this rather uncritical religious embrace of Euro-American language ideologies (i.e. that language exists in standard monolithic form) and the almost cultic celebration at the altar of colonial ideologies of language (i.e. that language is

there to be used as weapon of cultural normalisation). Some of the crucial questions that can be raised based on insights from decolonial thought are the following: Are there no philosophies of language other than those inherited from the Global North? If they are indeed absent, why are we not able to develop some? Why do scholars, governments and social policy experts from the Global South always choose the easy route of adopting language ideologies and theoretical frameworks originating from the Global North? It is my considered view that languages do not necessarily have to exist as ontological entities in the world and neither do they emerge from or represent fixed real environment. This view of language exposes the tensions, contradictions and falsehoods underpinning dominant ideologies and narratives that consider languages to be standardised and enumerable ontological objects.

Another pertinent point is one about the cross-border status of most African vehicular cross-border languages, which remains vague, problematic and therefore subject to contestation and disputation on three grounds: (a) Vehicular cross-border languages are cultural artefacts used by hegemonic and socio-politically advantaged groups to emasculate and imprison entire populations into narrow ethnolinguistic norms; (b) Most of these languages assumed their status on account of the numerical supremacy of their ethnic speakers over those whose mother tongues are not in this privileged category. This is problematic in the sense that language is by its very nature a social matter whose symbolic and pragmatic value cannot be decided on the basis of numbers of speakers alone; (c) The third point is an inverse of (b) above: some African vehicular cross-border languages do not have large speaking populations identifying them as their heritage or ethnic languages and yet they enjoy the privileged 'cross-border language' status. A case in point here is Swahili in the east and central African countries of Tanzania, Kenya, Uganda and DRC where the small numbers of people who identify Swahili as their ethnic language do not warrant it the national language status that it currently enjoys⁶. However, through the processes of status planning in the form of terminology development coupled with vigorous popularization and political support (Legère, 2006), Swahili is now used with a higher degree of sophistication not only in east and central Africa but in many other parts of the world. It is now also an international language of widest communication that is taught at many higher education institutions in the United States of America, in the Netherlands and the European Union.

Some of the most recent scholarly debates and conversations in the fields of linguistics and applied linguistics have poignantly suggested the need to re-think, question, challenge and problematize current and dominant understandings about 'languages'. The 2008 volume, *Questioning Linguistics* edited by Mahboob & Knight, is one such example of emerging scholarly literature that takes a critical look at the discursive construction and imagination of 'languages'. This book originated from research presentations given at the 1st International Free Linguistics Conference that was held at the University of Sydney in October 2007. In summary, *Questioning Linguistics* does the following seven things:

- Outlines some of the language assumptions that we often take as facts and then highlights alternative ways of understanding linguistics;
- Provides new suggestions about the directions we might take as linguists and researchers in thinking about and analysing language and beyond;

- Advocates notions of freedom from all linguistic subfield divisions and from rigid presentation themes.
- Raises questions about current understandings about languages and linguistics
- Breaks down and attempts to further remove the disciplinary and sub-disciplinary borders that can be perceived in the field
- Invites language practitioners to reconsider the nature and focus of the field of study with the view to questioning a number of current thoughts about language theory, application and use
- Questions the current trends and practices in the application of linguistics in areas such as language teaching, language variation, and language attitudes (Mahboob & Knight, 2008).

The overall argument of all the contributions to this book is that ‘those parameters and boundaries that have grown out of the linguistics discipline, creating oppositions rather than complementarities have obscured the way that linguists pursue their endeavours towards language’ (Mahboob & Knight 2008: 4). The contributors’ belief is ‘that a deeper understanding of languages is only possible if we look beyond the versions of “languages” constructed by experts and engage with different traditions, understandings, and approaches to linguistics’ (ibid.: p. 15). To me, this is an explicit call for linguistics and language practitioners to explore and engage with other conceptualisations of ‘language’ in order to effectively address the multiversity of society’s language-related needs and challenges such as that of intercultural communication in an integrated Africa.

The other glaring issue that is ignored or inadequately captured by the African vehicular cross-border languages discourse is the idea of ‘Africa’. This is, no doubt, a very old but still relevant question that has been raised and discussed extensively by leading international scholars of African studies⁷. In their current iteration mainstream academic discourses on vehicular cross-border languages adopt a limiting and limited idea of Africa, focusing mainly on the physical land mass consisting of 55 nation-states plus the surrounding island nations and polities. Such conceptualisation of Africa narrows and misdirects complex issues of multilingualism, steering them in the direction of conservative neoliberal thinking reflected in the current notion of vehicular cross-border languages. Imaginations of the idea of Africa and about cross-border languages with an exclusive focus on the cartographic land mass called ‘Africa’ do not provide space for multiple trans-language practices and communicative modes of the peoples and polities that the integration project seeks to bring together.

Africa and African identities are often defined on the basis of numerous taxonomies including religious, ecological, ethnic, biological, linguistic, geographical and historical terms. Noting that ‘Africa does not end on Africa’s shores’, Mazrui (2005: 81) says how Africa is defined has been *a product of its interaction with other civilizations including Islam and the impact of the West*. Such a view of Africa is certainly deficient insofar as it overshadows African indigenous understandings of Africa and being African that have a long historical trajectory dating back to periods prior to contact with other civilizations. In a seminal work on ‘The Inventions of African

Identities and Languages: The Discursive and Developmental Implications, Paul Tiyambe Zeleza (2006) brings to the fore some difficulties associated with explicating what Africa and African identity really entail. Zeleza's point of departure is quoted here at length:

Africa is exceedingly difficult to define, which makes many academic and popular discourses on African identities and languages quite problematic. The idea of "Africa" is a complex one with multiple genealogies and meanings, so that extrapolations of "African" culture, identity or nationality, in the singular or plural, any extrapolations of what makes "Africa" "African", are often quite slippery as these notions tend to swing unsteadily between the poles of essentialism and contingency. Describing and defining "Africa" and all tropes prefixed by its problematic commandments entails engaging discourses about "Africa", the paradigms and politics through which the idea of "Africa" has been constructed and consumed, and sometimes celebrated and condemned. I argue that Africa is as much a reality as it is a construct whose boundaries – geographical, historical, cultural and representational – have shifted according to the prevailing conceptions and configurations of global racial identities and power, and African nationalism, including Pan-Africanism. At the beginning of the 21st century, the maps and meanings of "Africa" and "Africanness" are being reconfigured by both processes of contemporary globalization and the projects of African integration (Zeleza, 2006:14).

Zeleza's conceptual reasoning on the interrogation of Africa and African identities resonates with Marco Jacqemet's (2005) notion of transidiomatic identities, which 'describes the communicative practices of transnational groups that interact using different languages and communicative codes simultaneously present in a range of channels, both local and distant' (Jacqemet 2005: 5). The ideological premise of transidiomatic practices is a useful framework that recognizes tolerant, accommodative and recombinant identities based on multipresence, multilingual, deterritorialized and de-centred socio-political relations (*ibid.*: p.6). As opposed to popular definitions that underwrite essentialized linguistic identities emphasizing cultural insularity, the transidiomatic perspective is akin to Homi K. Bhabha's (1994) notion of constitutive hybridity.

The current debate on African integration should, therefore, not only be about Africa in a geographical sense because the presence of global Africa is an indisputable reality. There are several living populations of African communities all over the world and language is one aspect of their identity that has endured geographical space from homeland Africa. There is a compelling need for us to build on and extend into new directions of emerging scholarly and social policy research centring on multilingual citizenship to provide fresh insights into understandings of African integration. Briefly defined, multilingual citizenship entails the recognition, active support and promotion of actual use of most language forms, lects and communication modes used by citizens as part of their individual and collective identities (Blackledge 2005). The concept of multilingual citizenship is increasingly becoming an established conceptual framework widely used in international research to inform social policy on identity, participation, social cohesion and cross-cultural understanding. Examples of such studies include Blackledge (2005), Hogan-Brun et al. (2009), McNamara (2009) and Shohamy (2009). These studies have shown how crucial it is to consider competing identity narratives in understanding who is accepted as being in or out of multilingual communities in the context of concerns over social justice for speakers of different languages who may be unable to gain access to membership of normative national identity narratives in different regions or parts of the world (Blackledge 2005). With specific

reference to the United Kingdom, Blackledge (2005: 32) suggests that ‘there is often a dynamic tension between identities asserted and chosen by self, and identities asserted and chosen for the individual by state, nation or institution’. This observation is applicable to the current African situation in which the African Union (through Acalan) seeks to impose VCBLs as prime markers of individual and group identities ignoring the multiverse nature of African polities.

Another emerging body of literature (see for example, Ndhlovu 2009 and 2010; Collin 2009; Ward 2008; Coleman 2008; Coleman & Rowe 2005) suggests that personal experiences increasingly shape the way most people in multilingual societies make sense of, and develop strategies for managing competing ideas, identity options, histories and language resources. For instance, despite all the odds against them, such as monolingual ideologies of language policies and the temptation to cling tenaciously onto homogenizing national linguistic and cultural identities, African migrant and diaspora communities continue to see themselves as indelibly connected to the idea of being African. In a study on patterns of language use among the African-Australian diaspora community, Ndhlovu (2010) found that the surveyed group expressed positive attitudes towards their ethnic languages:

Exigencies of group socio-cultural cohesion within migrant communities of shared linguistic backgrounds and the desire to maintain strong connections with native homeland [were cited as] the main motivations for positive attitudes towards ethnic languages (Ndhlovu 2010: 296).

Thus, in the broader context of the realities of global migration and cross-border movements of human populations, individual and group agency ensure that different African linguistic identities continue to thrive alongside other language and cultural identities far away from geographical ‘Africa’. Unlike national citizenship that can be traded with relative ease, African linguistic identities continue to be reformed and recreated by Africans in the diaspora. In other words, African communities in the diaspora constitute an integral part of how Africa continues to evolve and register its presence beyond the traditional confines of national geographical boundaries. Any imaginations of an integrated Africa should, therefore, recognize and harness the hybrid multilingual and multicultural identities of the African Diaspora communities. The big question is this: to what extent does the idea of African integration mediated through African vehicular cross-border languages promise to take into account and accommodate these competing and contending versions of being and becoming African?

5. CONCLUSION

When considered from a non-critical perspective, the concept of vehicular cross-border languages would appear to be a new, attractive, innovative and Africa-centred approach to solving intercultural communication challenges associated with economic and political integration projects. Because they are widely used across different borders of current African nation-states, vehicular cross-border languages seem to be the natural successors to national languages that were instrumental in the fashioning of certain forms of uniform national identities during the colonial and postcolonial periods. However, as this paper has tried to indicate, African multiversity is too complex to be accommodated within a selection of 12 monolithic language forms modelled after western philosophies of language. Drawing on insights from decolonial

thought, the paper has challenged the Eurocentric language ideologies that inform the idea of vehicular cross-border languages. What decolonial epistemic perspective reveals is that we need to think beyond the traditional modernist paradigms and conceptualisations of ‘languages’. We also need to take a closer look at what the dominant views about languages can and cannot do. The present iteration of vehicular cross-border languages is too limited and limiting both in scope and in content for this category of languages to be used in a manner that addresses the anticipated intercultural communication challenges of an integrated Africa. As Alastair Pennycook (2010: 6) has recently advised, ‘we need to appreciate that language cannot be dealt with separately from speakers, histories, cultures, places, ideologies’. Therefore, in the final analysis, this paper concludes that the architects of African integration need de-linking from colonial power matrices and think differently about issues of language and language practices – think in ways that are consistent with the multiversity of African polities that communicate and interact in multiple non-standardised language forms and other multi-modal communication channels. Such a paradigm shift will avoid misdirecting the African multilingual debate and also lead to acknowledgement, recognition and accommodation into the African integration agenda multiple ways of knowing, doing, reading and interpreting the world.

NOTES

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ENDNOTES

- 1 Endowed with approximately 30% of the world’s living languages (Grimes, 2000; Batibo, 2005) Africa is one of the most linguistically multiverse regions of the world.
- 2 Please refer to the first paragraph of the Introduction to this paper for information on key decolonial thinkers.
- 3 See for example the work of Ndhlovu (2009, 2007, 2006); Brutt-Griffler (2006); Mufwene (2001, 2002); Chimhundu (1992); Makoni (1998) and Ranger (1985).
- 4 Please refer to Ndhlovu (2009, 2007, and 2006) and Chimhundu (2005 and 1992) for more detailed analyses of the work of Clement M. Doke in the Zimbabwean linguistic landscape.
- 5 See, for example, Mufwene (2002 and 2001); Brutt-Griffler (2002 and 2006); and Makoni (1998).
- 6 Batibo (2006: 271) indicates that only about 10% of Tanzanians identify Swahili as their ethnic/heritage language while the rest speak it as a second or additional language.
- 7 See for example the work of V. Y. Mudimbe (1988), A. A. Mazrui (2005) and P. T. Zelelza (2006)

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