Shifting the Lenses: Multilanguaging, Decolonisation and Education in the Global South, edited by Leketi Makalela

Reviewed by Veronica Irene McKay
https://orcid.org/0000-0002-2819-7891
University of South Africa, College of Education
mckayvi@unisa.ac.za

Shifting the Lenses: Multilanguaging, Decolonisation and Education in the Global South is an edited volume of seven articles.

The book begins with Leketi Makalela explaining his metaphor "shifting lenses," which he contends is necessary to refocus our attention on the role that multilanguaging plays in decolonising education.

He locates his discussion within the history of the colonisation of Africa, pointing to the Berlin Convention of 1884–1885, which is generally seen as the official balkanisation of the African states. This process gave rise to the monolingual state that was imposed on the new founded colonies, with the colonial language promoted to the exclusion of the other languages, so that the colonies resembled the colonial "motherland."

Makalela argues for multilingual competences contending that languages overlap, and despite the colonial attempts to divide languages into artificial entities "individual multilingualism thrived and resisted the boundaries of separation" (p. 3). As he points out, "the average African child speaks about three languages before they start school," giving rise to complex language use where speakers use languages flexibly in their natural habitus and classroom. He terms this *ubuntu-translanguaging*—the main tenet of which is that no single language is complete without another—and this phenomenon opens opportunities for multilanguaging in education. As he argues, languaging is complex and defies the orderliness of language boundaries suggested by monolingualism. Flowing from this, he

challenges the sequential introduction of languages as presented in the language in education policy (p. 123) stating that:

> The separatist view of language and classifications of "first language," "second language," and "mother tongue," do not fit the socio-linguistic realities of the majority of the speakers in the 21st century.

The other seven contributions in the book expand on this theme:

Kwesi Kwaa Prah, a Ghanaian professor, starts off the first chapter by arguing that no country can make progress on the basis of a borrowed language. He defends this assertion by comparing the period of development between Asian and African countries after independence: the postcolonial Asian societies, which today are performing very well economically, were once colonies like contemporary African countries. He attributes the momentous Asian progress to the fact that countries like Malaysia, Indonesia, India, Thailand, Vietnam and South Korea swiftly decolonised their systems and abandoned colonial languages in favour of the usage of their own languages. He contrasts this to what he terms Africa's "snail pace" of progress (p. 5) resulting from sub-Saharan African countries failing to uphold their own languages and accepting the supremacy of the colonial languages, long after the colonialists had left their shores. The danger of this, he points out, is that it leads to the perdition of culture, resulting in the cultural and linguistic self-negation of the African languages. When applied to language in education, he argues that academics need to transcend the academic nitpicking which is currently in vogue and focus on the use of the languages spoken by the majority of the population as languages of learning and thereby improve literacy rates. This he argues is a precondition if we are to make up the scientific and technological backlog in order to move Africa forward.

The second chapter entitled "Language and Literacy Education in Complexly Multilingual Contexts—Reflections for Theory and Practice," by Munene Mwaniki, explores the shifting perspectives on the epistemologies of language and literacy education in the North and argues for the creation of appropriate programmes that valorise and capitalise on the local language complexities in the South. He challenges the stranglehold of Northern epistemologies on local, situated realities and argues that we need to debunk the mythological hold of Northern epistemologies on language and literacy education in the developing world. The arrogance of these epistemologies, he contends, has succeeded in positioning the former colonial languages in an almost unassailable position in the curriculum in the developing world despite a plethora of research into the essentialness of mother tongue education, not least the UNESCO investigation on the use of vernacular languages in education published in 1953.

He criticises Western notions of multilingualism, which basically involve "multiple monolingualisms." In contrast with this Eurocentric view, in the South it involves a way of living, a recognition that it is impossible to survive with one language, a recognition that most African languages tend to cross geographic borderers and contexts such as the

workplace, family, religion—where no single language repertoire monopolises any linguistic interactions because in their natural settings people speak more than one language in one conversation.

Valorising local languages also entails the celebration of the dynamic and complex relationships between and among languages and the relational place of language and literacy education in the curricula. Accordingly, he argues (p. 41),

> there is a need for an acknowledgement that the exalted former colonial languages are not well taught in educational systems in Africa and the developing world; that they deepen the educational crises they are purported to solve. Such acknowledgement would lead to an appreciation of the primacy of indigenous languages in a developmental approach to language and literacy education.

Birgit Brock-Utne follows on this line of thinking in the third chapter, "Decolonisation of Research in the African University," where she argues that in order to free African intellectuals from being appendages of Western scholarship, there is a need to transform research in African universities. Such a project will entail decolonisation by using African languages to convey subject matter in classrooms and by African intellectuals themselves using local cultural competences and languages. She juxtaposes the interest that African universities have in indigenous knowledge with the level of their interest in the African languages. Her argument can be evidenced in the number of South African universities that decimated their departments of African languages in the interest of their "business" models over the past decade while simultaneously attempting to Africanise and decolonise their curricula.

While focusing on research, she unpacks the problems of how foreign tests, such as the Programme for International Student Assessment (PIRLS), the Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study (TIMSS) and OECD's Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) are finding their way into Africa. She purports that not only is the content of these exams built on Western models, foreign to the majority of children, but so also is the language in which learners take the tests. (The application of the PIRLS in South Africa has a very questionable sample in respect of language.) The TIMSS tests are taken in English, of which, Brock-Utne argues, learners (and their teachers) have poor mastery and consequently they fail either because they do not understand the questions or because they are unable to express themselves clearly in English. She poses three pertinent questions in respect of these international tests (p. 60): How feasible and desirable is it to measure learning across the world along one set of scales? What implications does a single, internationally recognised measure have for school curricula? And how will the spillover generate capacity to measure and improve education quality at the national level? She refers to the backwash effect noting that the pressure of the tests defines the knowledge and skills that are valued around the world and frame the subjects that are likely to be taught. In shifting the lenses, one would need to take into account the language and culture of tests

that are used to measure the children of Africa and how these tests surreptitiously impinge on local curricula.

In Chapter 4, Nkhensani Maluleke and Leketi Makalela report on a study undertaken in the early-grade reading phase. Their chapter, "An Inventory of Text Types for Xitsonga and English Early-Grade Readers: Implications for Translanguaging and Transtextual Practices," shows that the Foundation Phase is biased towards narrative texts in both English and Xitsonga. They argue for a balance between expository and narrative texts because they say expository texts are seldom taught in this phase, yet learners need to be familiar with a range of text types that will meet their literacy needs in Grade 4 when the transition to learning through the medium of English occurs. In addition, they point out that the challenge of language transition is often compounded by the fact that learners are inadequately prepared in their first language, which is relied upon to provide a foundation for learning in English after Grade 3.

As a possible solution, they argue for transtextual and translingual materials to cater for the needs of multilingual children. The translingual text would comprise transgraphic alternation of phrases, words and sentences in the same text and the notion of transtextual resources refers to texts that are "both narrative and expository at the same time" (p. 70). (This latter idea of transtextual resources is what was attempted in the DBE's Rainbow Workbooks: through applying the principles of the "language across the curriculum approach" the language workbooks endeavoured to integrate narrative and expository texts by including, for example, a story about a school tour where children were exposed to map work and expository or information text about wild life, conservation or heritage sites. From Grade R, the DBE language workbooks, which are compulsory texts for all public schools, introduce learners to species that are extinct—a range of dinosaurs—to reading charts, recipes, first aid, health and safety in a way that integrates the two genres.) Moreover, this transtextual genre is carried across to the DBE's Life Skills books. In its defence, it would seem that the DBE had to some extent offered a combined or transtextual approach. Maluleke and Makalele, in this chapter, appear to focus only on a sample of reading books sold by commercial publishers—books that are presumably on the DBE's official list. Often the selection of books by teachers come with a myriad of other interests that may preclude assessing for genre.

In Chapter 5, "Teaching and Learning Mathematics through Multilingualism: The Case of Mathematics Student Teachers in South Africa," Judah Makonye investigated optimal conditions for multilingualism in the teaching of mathematics. He observes that multilingualism improved the interaction of the learners and teachers and also their disciplinary knowledge. Counter-intuitively the study showed that a large portion of the sampled student teachers (about 70%) did not share the view that multilingualism enhanced learning or indeed that multilingualism was important for teaching and learning mathematics. They nevertheless conceded that multilingualism enhanced inter-learner discussions of mathematic concepts. The most important findings of this study were

derived from the learners' perspective which showed the multilingualism helped to engender a positive attitude and brought about a "warmth" to the learning atmosphere in the classroom! And after all, these are very important preconditions for learning.

Chapter 6 by Rebekka J. Jez entitled "Inspiring Literacy from a Global Perspective: How to Use Culturally Responsive and Inclusive Instruction to Increase Literacy for All Learners" focuses on how multilingualism can enhance learning in inclusive classrooms by catering for the diverse language learning needs of learners. The author argues that by shifting the lens from the traditional one-size-fits-all or the one-language-fits-all approach to a more culturally responsive and inclusive approach, learners will benefit through broadening the language usage to support the learning and language practices of all learners.

Lastly in Chapter 7, Leketi Makalela provides an overview of the issues and problems that face higher education institutions. His chapter "Multilanguaging Engagements in Higher Education: A Case of an Applied Language Postgraduate Course" shows that while policy makes provisions for using African languages in higher education, English remains the only de facto language of teaching and learning. He refers to a postgraduate class where he piloted reflections on sociolinguistic concepts using more than one language and shows how this provided novel concept coining and multilanguaging which derive from the ubuntu translanguaging approach he explained in the introduction. In this case study, he shows how terms are used interchangeably, how they are borrowed and coined and how the use of more than two languages enriched the process of meaning-making and enhanced deeper understandings.

The chapters of this book provide a well-organised guide for looking at the importance of normalising the use of more than one language in teaching the same lesson and text. The book argues for this ubuntu translanguaging, for the incorporation of new epistemologies and new ways of viewing literacy, language in education and language policies and practices.

This relatively compact book (the main text is 135 pages) packs a powerful punch and provides important reading for scholars. It provides useful information both for professionals involved with language education and language policy as well as for students grappling with the current debates in the global South.