Chapter 12 bis.

The issue of languages in African continental and Regional integration in Higher Education

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Presentation

This chapter deals with an issue of substance that should be inherent to any discussion on higher education policy and internationalization (including in the contexts of regional and continental integration in Africa) but is often skipped: the issue of languages. This is an issue very sensitive from a political perspective and on which widely different, even conflicting, views can be held from an analytical perspective. Therefore, the reader can perfectly disagree with the thesis defended in the chapter. However, the idea is to bring the reader's attention to the following questions, which seem worth a serious reflection:

- What are the connections which exist between languages and the regional and/or continental integration of higher education institutions in Africa?

- Why should a top-down approach to language issues elaborated by consultants and imposed on states be avoided?

- What do we know about the overall language situation in Africa?

- How can Artificial Intelligence fosterRegional/Continental integration of University Education in Africa?

Contents of the Chapter

1. Introduction

This chapter looks into the connection between languages and the regional and/or continental integration of higher education institutions (HEIs) in Africa within the broader framework of regional or continental integration processes (Torrent: 2022). The argument developed is that while co-operation between HEIs on the African continent can contribute to allowing HEIs to meet the needs of contemporary society, this will only be possible if the adequate mechanisms to drive the type of collaboration needed are found and implemented. In particular, this chapter underlines the importance of taking into account the cultural and, more specifically, the linguistic implications of any framework which will serve as a reference for establishing networks between HEIs on the African continent. While this chapter will not, at this stage, engage in the debate around decoloniality[2] (Mignolo & Walsh: 2018), it cannot avoid stressing the cultural mission of universities on a continent that is at a crossroads of its history.

To start with, all major stakeholders in higher education believe that, because of the developmental requirements of the African continent, issues such as increased and equitable access to university education and training, diversification of teaching and training programmes, intensive involvement in quality research, and the fostering of innovation are some of the various challenges facing HEIs on the continent. These issues can all benefit from regional and continental integration in higher education. Several initiatives taken illustrate that the African continent has seriously examined the significance and modalities of building a closer alignment of its higher education systems. One can refer to the report titled *Harmonization of Higher Education Programmes in Africa: A Strategy for the African Uni*on, which was endorsed by the Third Ordinary Session of the Conference of the Ministers of Education of the African Union in 2007. One of the major goals set in this report concerned building strong links among higher education institutions and establishing appropriate networks and regional university associations. As a follow-up to that report, strategic decisions have been taken to work towards regional-based university networks, regional student mobility programmes, and pan-regional higher education associations. Examples which demonstrate that the African authorities have implemented these plans are the establishment of the African Quality Rating Mechanism, the Nyerere African Scholarship scheme, the AfriQAN network of quality assurance agencies, regional centres of excellence, the new regional UNESCO Arusha Convention on the Recognition of Qualifications, a Pan-African University, and the new Open Education Africa project. Further examples are the ongoing, and partially achieved, work on:

(1) The African Standards and guidelines for quality Assurance (ASG-QA)

(2) The African Continental Qualifications Framework (ACQF)

(3) The African Credit Accumulation and Transfer System (ACTS).

Beyond the initiatives taken lies the fundamental question of the framework which determines the detailed sets of policies as well as the goals which are laid down. Before analysing some of the characteristics of frameworks of the regional integration of HEIs, it might be useful to reflect on how the chapters uses two key terms of its title, namely, *regional* and *integration*.

2. The task of decoloniality involves engaging in an epistemic transformation which starts with a critical examination of the 'universality' and exclusivity of the Western world view as well as with the recognition of the legitimacy of alternative ways of thinking and being in the world that the rhetoric of modernity has negated (Mignolo & Walsh: 2018). The advocates of decoloniality establish a direct link between their epistemic stance and the importance given to southern epistemologies which aim to validate knowledge from underrepresented and oppressed parts of the world.

2. Regional integration in Higher Education

The two key terms used in the first part of the title, namely, *regional* and *integration*, need to be problemati-sed because these labels do not have a unique and widely accepted definition. One can begin with the term *regional*. While *region* is the root concept of the process of regionalisation, regionalisation can take a variety of forms, from simple networking (a political approach sometimes supported by academics (Mohamedbhai: 2017)), to the building of regional institutions (as in the case of the Pan-African University).

The regions that are constituted can be overlapping, interconnected and multi-layered: in any case, it is the network (and the objectives it sets) which defines the regions involved (both its contours and meanings), and not the other way round. An interesting example of a multi-layered process of regional collaboration in higher education is the partnership signed in 2006 between the German Academic Exchange Service (DAAD) and the Inter-University Council for East Africa (IUCEA). This collaboration is part of a policy aiming to harmonise certain activities of the HEIs in the East African community with the model of European institutions which draws from the Bologna Process. However, the first layer of the process concerned co-ordinating and piloting the university policies of the various national higher education commissions of each member country of the IUCEA.

The second term is that of *integration*. It must be said that in the literature devoted to the question of the re-lationships established between HEIs, various terms are used: collaboration, alignment, harmonisation, and integration. All the different terms can be mapped out in a continuum with, at one end, a limited form of re-gionalisation that can be captured by the term *co-operation* and, at the other, the concept of *integration* that refers to the most intensive form of collaboration. The use of the term *continuum* should not imply that all forms of partnership can be organised in a linear model. However, whatever the nature of the type of regio-nalisation which is targeted, the goals will never be achieved if all the adequate resources are not available.

In their paper titled *Higher Education Finance: Implications for Regionalisation*, Pillay et al. (2017) underline the critical importance of funding in order to ensure that the necessary conditions are created for any process of regional or continental integration to be on track. Westerheijden et al. (2010), who adopt a broader pers-pective, claim that, apart from finance, the following are the prerequisites for a successful implementation of policy decisions when targeting the networking of HEIs: proper institutional support, strong political commit-ment and suitable coordination among different actors.

A reflection which contributes to an understanding of some issues related to Higher Education from the perspective of Regional Integration/International Cooperation is Torrent's chapter titled "The Analytical Fra-mework of Higher Education Policy" in "*Materials on African Regional and Continental Integration in Higher Education (2022). While the author adopts a broad-based approach aiming at providing an Analytical Fra-mework for Higher Education Reform* and the articulation which can be established with Regional Integration, part of the chapter provides an explanation of what Hudzik (in Torrent : *Ibid*. : 11) terms the new concept of comprehensive internationalization. Hudzik defines it as a commitment, confirmed through action, to infuse international and comparative perspectives throughout the teaching, research and service missions of higher education. The term comprehensive becomes still more significant when one takes into account the inade-quate measures taken by universities to achieve internationalisation. Indeed, as Hudzik claims, while many universities claim to be international or internationalised institutions, the initiatives taken and implemented are fragmented and deficient when they ought to have been strategic aiming at achieving the objectives set.

If one establishes a link between the argument developed in this chapter and the issue of a comprehensive strategic approach towards internationalization or the more realistic goal of regional cooperation, one can safely say that no project involving high-stake collaboration between institutions of higher education in a continent that is at a major turning point in its history can ignore the cultural and, in particular, linguistic implications of the collaboration process. In an era where context-specific solutions are emphasised in any collaboration between different African and European[3] institutions, the least that African decision-makers

3. It has proved difficult to choose adequate terms to refer to the other part of the world which can be concerned by international collaboration involving African Universities. As R. Torrent claims (private message), Europe and the EU are not the same. Europe, itself, is a quite equivocal term: one does not know whether Europe refers only to Western and Central Europe or also embraces Eastern Europe (Russia, Ukraine, Belarus and countries in Caucasus, all of which, by the way, are members of the European Higher Education Area -EHEA- and of the Council of Europe, an international organization different from the European Union).

should do when envisaging planned collaboration in the field of (higher) education is to take into account the cultural implications of their initiatives. There are too many examples of the failure of the technicist approach that leaves these cultural implications aside. And the African Union Continental Education Strategy for Africa (CESA) 2016 – 2025, which targets the development of quality human resources, stresses the importance of African core values to achieve the vision of the African Union. In the next section of this paper, I discuss and stress again the linguistic issues at stake in the regional and continental collaboration between HEIs in Africa.

3. A summary of propositions regarding languages

3.1. General Approach

- The reflections made in this chapter are based on the principle that the linguistic and cultural implications of the process of regional and continental co-operation should not be underestimated because this process involves the mobility of students and staff across the continent and/or the exchange of expertise and research results as well as the sharing of technical information on science and technology as specified, for example, in articles 128(d)&(h) of the treaty of the Common Market for Eastern and Southern Africa (COMESA).

- This chapter does not aim to propose a 'model' or a theoretical framework for decision-making processes concerning the role and functions that languages can and in fact should play with regard to regional integration in higher education. Rather it identifies and critically analyses some of the major issues which should be taken into account if project leaders decide to examine the language question in view of the policy guidelines that may be provided to decision-makers on the continent. Once these issues have been examined, policy guidelines could be elaborated.

- One of the major assumptions of this chapter is that there cannot and should not be a top-down approach to language issues that **is elaborated by consultants and imposed on states** which are sovereign in terms of language policy decisions. The proposals which could result from the reflections undertaken in this chapter and which can be recycled at a later stage as policy guidelines will need to be

  - examined to assess whether they are compatible with the fundamental principles on which policy decisions are based in each national context;

  - workable within the regional or continental collaboration established; and

  - monitored and evaluated after an initial period during which the proposals are piloted.

- It must be underlined that this chapter adopts a restrictive sociolinguistic approach that excludes broader issues such as the scope which can be given to decoloniality (an issue raised earlier) as an ideological frame which can serve to drive language policies pertaining to the regional or continental integration of HEIs.

- It is worth taking into account that it may be relatively easy to reach a consensus on some of the objectives set regarding language policy while other objectives may prove to be more problematic. For example, it might be fairly complex to manage the conflicting values and functions attributed to some of the major languages, in particular those linked with the colonial history or even with post-colonial events (e.g., the case of French in Rwanda) of African countries. A further illustration is that, while English is perceived as a fairly neutral language in Mauritius, it can be seen, in certain contexts, as a colonial language or as one perpetuating social injustice (e.g., as in South Africa). In Rwanda or Algeria, French can be linked to painful memories. All languages do not have the same significations and values in all African countries.

- One final caveat is to be added: Propositions should be flexible to allow stakeholders to choose the ones which resonate with their political and cultural policies as well as with the requirements of the goals set both in national contexts and in the collaborative framework envisaged.

3.2. The Overall Language Situation in Africa

In spite of the limited visibility of research conducted on language issues on the continent as a whole, it is well known that Africa is the most diversified continent in terms of languages. It is estimated that there are about 2,000 different languages spoken on the African continent and that these make up one third of all languages spoken worldwide.

This being said, the situation can vary from one country to another: Cameroun has a population of around 27 million, with over 250 different languages spoken as first languages alongside English and/or French. On the other hand, more than 99% of Rwandans speak Kinyarwanda, a Bantu language and the country's mother-tongue, but the country has three other official languages, namely, French, English and Swahili.

In terms of language policy, the situation is also, of course, highly complex. For example, after the apartheid system in South Africa was dismantled, all 11 languages spoken by different population groups were declared official languages in the 1996 Constitution, but this would be impossible in Cameroun and in particular in Nigeria where 525 native languages are spoken. Other countries such as Mauritius, which were colonised by the British, have opted to avoid adopting a *de jure* official language policy. I

t is against this complex sociolinguistic background that decisions concerning languages and their link with the regional or continental integration of HEIs will be discussed. To end this paragraph on a very positive note, it must be underlined that the African continent has a widespread historical tradition of managing multilin-

gualism for both official communication and social integration.

3.3. Assumptions

Languages for Regional and Continental Integration

The roles and functions of languages will depend on the nature and extent of the collaboration of HEIs targeted. These goals and objectives range, inter alia, from an approach of integration that refers to the most intensive form of collaboration to specific forms of collaboration such as the establishment of a common credit system for the mobility of staff and students and/or the development of standards and guidelines for quality assurance. Each of the examples provided has its own set of linguistic implications. In this regard, some of the major issues which could form the foundations of potential language policy decisions will now be analysed.

Universities and the Promotion of Indigenous Languages

Because of limited space, it is difficult to develop a detailed argument concerning the promotion of indigenous languages. One can simply refer to the statement made by Professor Mohamed Abdulaziz of the University of Nairobi during the World Congress of African Languages held in Leipzig, Germany in 1997. He stated that African universities have a duty to promote indigenous languages in order to preserve the linguistic heritage of Africa. This stance resonates with article 12(1) of the Southern African Development Community's (SADC's) Protocol on Culture, Information and Sports which reads as follows: '*Member states shall formulate and implement language policies that will aim at promoting indigenous languages for (…) socio-economic development*'.

Within continental and regional frameworks of cooperation, African universities should contribute to the development of indigenous languages so that they may be used as vehicles of communication and knowledge in some specific spheres of modern life. Part of universities' mission could entail contributing to the standardisation and intellectualisation of languages that do not have a written tradition. Further, African languages, literatures and cultures could be included in the teaching programmes of all African universities. These languages could be used as medium of instruction in formal programmes or for supporting students with learning difficulties, taking into account their socio-cognitive potential. The argument concerning the positive

impact of using indigenous languages wherever possible for teaching and learning is fairly well documented in the literature.

So, the issue to be examined, from the perspective of regional and continental integration is the following: Would entities and bodies responsible for regional and continental co-operation of HEIs look into establishing policy decisions aimed at encouraging HEIs to contribute to standardising, intellectualising and promoting indigenous languages for their potential use in higher education?

Cross-Border Languages for Intensive Regional Co-operation

The promotion of cross-border languages for regional co-operation features prominently in the agenda of African decision-makers. For example, SADC created the Linguistic Association for SADC Universities (LASU) in 1984. One of its core objectives is to promote vehicular cross-border languages in the region, an objective that the association is still pursuing. This objective is also in line with the African Academy of Languages' (ACALAN), whose main mandate is to strategise the promotion of the major vehicular cross-border languages on the continent for communication and integration. Indeed, in 2002, ACALAN (the linguistic arm of the African Union) was established with the aim of promoting the vehicular cross-border languages in the SADC region. Five of the languages spoken in the SADC region, namely, Setswana, Chinyanja, Kiswahili, Malagasy, and Lingala, were identified to serve as regional languages. However, of these five languages, the language which has the highest potential for cross-border collaborative initiatives in higher education is Swahili. This language has spread to more than 14 countries, namely, Tanzania, Kenya, Uganda, Rwanda, Burundi, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, South Sudan, Somalia, Mozambique, Malawi, Zambia, and Comoros, as well as Oman and Yemen in the Middle East. The other vehicular cross-border language which has assumed certain international and technical functions is Arabic, although a major distinction needs to be made between classical Arabic and the vernacular Arabic languages (I will leave this debate for another day). While English, French and Portuguese can serve as languages for the intensive regional integration of HEIs in the respective Anglophone, Francophone and Lusophone countries, a case may be made for an intensive (selective) regional integration using Arabic (classical or dialectal varieties) and, in the near future, Swahili.

How to organize Continental Co-operation in Higher Education from the perspective of Languages

Asmelash and Kassahun (2022) have stated that cooperation in the field of higher education figures prominently on the agenda of African international organisations such as the Organisation of African Unity, the Association of African Universities and the Association for the Development of Education in Africa. From a sociolinguistic perspective, it would be easier to establish collaboration between the different linguistic blocs such as Anglophone, Francophone and Arabophone institutions or Lusophone institutions. If, however, decision-makers want to involve all African countries, they will first have to strategically identify the goals set, and, second, they will need to ensure that the linguistic (and cultural) implications of their decisions are taken into account.

To contribute to an adequate organization of Continental Co-operation in Higher Education from the perspective of Languages, I would suggest the following:

- It would be politically, culturally and financially costly to impose the use of one language (e.g., English) on all institutions in order to enhance continental co-operation of HEIs on the African continent. African HEIs may end up consolidating globalisation from a linguistic and cultural perspective (Phillipson: 1997 & 2008). Furthermore, Anglicisation will place linguistic and financial burdens on the limited resources available for higher education on the continent.

- Apart from the costs mentioned above, two other significant costs need to be underlined. First, from an educational perspective, Airey et al. (2017) have demonstrated that students taught in a foreign language take more time to achieve results than those taught in a first language (L1). Further, Lehtonen et al.'s (in Airey et al.: .) investigations in Finland's two-year master's programmes have indicated that students display problems in using conceptual language when they use a language that is not their L1. Second, in countries which are in the first stages of democratising higher education, the use of a foreign language for teaching and learning may impact access to higher education of students from an underprivileged family background. In other words, the use of a foreign language may have significant educational and social costs.

- It will be difficult to establish collaboration between all students and all scholars in all disciplines of all African Universities. Academic hubs need to be identified and constituted, and collaboration between these hubs can be established. For example, the University of Pretoria, which has developed international expertise in the field of veterinary sciences, can offer support to all relevant scholars and students wishing to benefit from the resources available at the university in that field. For this to occur, students and scholars will need to master English as it is this institution's language of teaching, learning and research. Although it is difficult to determine the goals that will be set for a continental collaboration project of HEIs, one thing which seems reasonable is that it would be unrealistic to involve all HEIs in all collaborative projects.

- Although mobility between linguistic blocs might facilitate exchanges, decision-makers should consider the possibility of the mobility of academic staff and students between different linguistic blocs for the obvious linguistic and cultural benefits of such exchanges. The benefits of exchanges between language, literature and cultural specialists obviously come to mind; however, specialists in other disciplines can also benefit from such exchanges.

4. Some tentative conclusions in the form of questions

All chapters of the HAQAA Materials on African Regional and Continental Integration in Higher Education include two final sections, one with the Conclusions of the Chapter and an additional one on Summary of the Chapter in a few questions.   Considering the approach used in preparing this chapter on the issue of languages, it has seemed convenient to merge these two sections in one:

- Taking into account the amount of resources (both human and technical) needed for regional and continental networking, would it be feasible, achievable and, more importantly, politically acceptable to adopt one language as the main medium of continental co-operation? An adequate answer to this question is important because of the debatable claims made by certain researchers. For example Hernández-Carrion (2011) states that the continuation of the reform process, which started in European Union countries following the implementation of the Bologna Process, implies that there is a need to accept the expansion of the English language. Would this stance be compatible with the current combat for decolonisation on the African continent? What would it entail for countries with no Anglophone tradition? The answer seems clearly negative: The (failed) project in Madagascar to Anglicise its education system in the 1990s could serve as an illustration of the unsurmountable difficulties faced by such an approach.

- If it is assumed, on the basis of the answers to the questions raised in the previous paragraph, that African decision-makers are not ready to bear all the technical, human, educational and social costs of moving to a monolingual language policy in Africa, and that it is much preferable to have a multilingual policy because of its numerous advantages, would it be possible possible to identify one or a series of cross-border languages conducive to strategic regional and continental integration? What would be the exact meaning and scope to be given to this multilingual language policy? These issues may be worth discussing with different stakeholders involved in African HEIs.

- In particular, to what extent could English, French, Portuguese and Arabic (classical Arabic or one of its dialectal varieties used in North Africa) facilitate regional integration (with English serving as a tool for targeted strategic continental co-operation)?

- As far as the management of administrative and technical (non-academic) exchanges is concerned, would it be suitable to adopt one language formula for all institutions or will a bi-/or trilingual policy be achievable? What would be the cost implications of the different decisions which can be taken?

The issues raised can form the foundation of language policy decisions relating to the regional or continental integration of HEIs. While the nature and extent of the collaboration will determine the linguistic implications to be taken into account, it is proposed that a top-down, non-flexible approach should be avoided as language issues are particularly sensitive and can have visible and invisible cost implications.

5. Appendix: New horizons: Artificial Intelligence

In the last few years, Artificial Intelligence has invaded the academic and policy debates. It is undoubtful that its generalization can and most probable will have an influence on the treatment of any issue related to languages. This chapter is not the place to enter into this debate. However, it is also impossible not to make a reference to it. This is the purpose of the following paragraphs.

There is a belief among many academics that while Artificial Intelligence raises questions of academic integrity in higher education, it can also be critical for universities because of the opportunity that it can provide to increase their relevance and sustainability. In the field of languages, researchers are of the view that AI-powered language platforms can break down language barriers: real-time translation services can be offered, students can learn from educators who speak different languages. More significantly, educators can use AI-powered platforms to create lessons in different languages, providing students with the opportunity to learn in their native language.

For these reasons, new education technology products will be available in higher education in the nearby future. These developments will put greater pressure on the higher education ecosystem. For reasons which will not be discussed here, this ecosystem is more fragile in the African Continent than it is in North America and most of the West European countries. To be more specific, in the years to come, African universities will have to try find the right balance between creating the guidelines and norms to prevent AI tools from undermining academic integrity and, at the same time, benefit from all that the new AI models can offer them not only by integrating them into their teaching, but also by using them for research and administration.

Regional/Continental integration of university education in Africa offers an opportunity that should not be overlooked as African University authorities address the issue of integrating artificial intelligence models into university programs and projects. They will then inevitably be confronted with the question of language, especially if African universities adopt a strategy aiming at pooling their resources and expertise. Some of the strategies mentioned when the issue of the linguistic implications of Regional/Continental integration was discussed can be extended to the question of artificial intelligence:

> Identifying Cross-Border Languages which can serve for Intensive Regional Co-operation with regard to Artificial Intelligence;

- Intellectualising these languages so that they are fully equipped both in terms of vocabulary and syntax to serve the purpose of cross-border collaboration with regard to Artificial Intelligence;

- Developing Academic hubs based on linguistic affinities and extending collaboration in these hubs to Artificial Intelligence.

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