

# Review

## Rethinking language use in digital Africa: Technology and communication in Sub-Saharan Africa (a review)

Original work by Leketi Makalela and Goodith White (Eds.) published by Multilingual Matters 2021

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In 2019/2020 just before the pandemic broke out in Europe I was part of a team exploring the teaching of English in technical institutes in Francophone countries to ease the access to employment of high school and technical college graduates. We went on to produce an English for special purposes course for learners wishing to integrate international companies. The company we created was a Nigerian online communication site (name made up) with branches in Kenya and South Africa. As *Rethinking Language Use in Digital Africa* shows, Nigeria, Kenya and South Africa are leading nations in establishing online sites not only for the establishment of online communication but also for the opportunity to establish native languages as a means of establishing communication online between different language groups and in the process helping local languages develop and spread across communities.

The purpose of the book is to show how online and social media resources have developed the use of African languages throughout the continent.

Using a widely spread group of contributors from Africa itself, the US, Canada, the UK and Ireland, its research has lessons for those interested in the survival and growth of minority languages in Europe and beyond, such as the Welsh language in the UK and Luxembourgish in Luxembourg and those interested in the development of plurilingualism, including international organisations.

The book is divided into four chapters with eight research papers in all. Chapter 1 deals with multilingual practice. Chapter 2 addresses linguistic and cultural maintenance. Chapter 3 analyses the effects of communication outside Africa. Chapter 4 examines the process of language change based on the study of how L1-mode intelligent software agents instruct Nigerian L2 speakers.

The book explores the role of digital media in Africa through the process of translanguaging, defined as the employment of multiple languages, often simultaneously, to communicate successfully. The term was coined in the 1980s by Cen Williams but has developed in the decades since. The

key to translanguaging in Africa has been the effect of the Covid-19 pandemic on digital communication. The pandemic has accelerated the use of digital communication in education, government, commerce and personal interaction and government investment therein.

There are, of course, issues to be faced, as the editors, Leketi Makalela and Goodith White, point out. Power outages, inadequate hardware, lack of trained personnel, classrooms and lecture halls not designed for online teaching and expensive broadband costs have all inhibited online education. Added to this is the predominant use of European languages, English, French and Portuguese, rather than the use of indigenous languages. This has posed problems for home learning as many parents are not proficient in English, French or Portuguese.

The breakthrough has been in the use of social media. Using apps such as WhatsApp, Facebook Messenger and WeChat, people have been able to talk via mobile phone using a mixture of indigenous languages and lingua francas, raising the profile and widening the use of indigenous languages.

In *Networks of Outrage and Hope*, Manuel Castells argues that digital technology can disrupt traditional power structures, by facilitating the creation of autonomous spaces that are beyond the role of governments. It allows participants to grow and develop because they are given freer agency.

In Chapter 1, Makalela introduces the concept of multilingual literacies and technology in Africa and stresses the fact that African languages have been left behind in the development of languages in digital technology. He points out that although multilingualism is the norm in many African societies, the ways of knowing through educational packages and technological advances are often dominated by a monolingual bias that disadvantages speakers of African languages. In spite of research pointing to the need for African languages to be supported, foreign language monolingualism is still the norm. Once again this can be applied to Europe and other continents where local minority languages are subordinated to the demands of the national language or international lingua franca.

One answer may be the increasing use of translanguaging via social media. As the book explains, translanguaging is the process by which multilingual speakers use their languages as an integrated communication system. So, a single sentence may contain features of different languages used by the online communicators or a sentence or phrase in one language may be followed by a sentence or phrase in another, all languages being used understood by parties to the communication.

Makalela argues for Ubuntu translanguaging. Ubuntu is a South African Nguni Bantu word meaning 'humanity'. It is expressed in the Bantu language saying, '*I am because we are*' or '*Humanity towards others*' and emphasises the importance of community and togetherness. Ubuntu translanguaging is about the use of plurilingualism to encourage inclusivity and togetherness and supports the use of indigenous languages as well as foreign languages. Classroom teachers regularly use indigenous languages to ask their students questions and answer questions posed by students. However, African languages rarely figure in digital communication. As a side observation, Ubuntu is also the name of a computer open source operating system.

Chapter 2 reports on an enquiry into the use of language on WhatsApp in Rwanda, in Southern Africa. The researchers surveyed three WhatsApp groups of 600 to find out what language or combination of languages were used in WhatsApp messaging. The aim was to examine how the translanguaging practices used affected social dynamics and to what extent they promoted digital literacy and multiliteracies. The preferences of the Rwandan population for WhatsApp was based on the increase of telephony penetration in Rwanda, and throughout sub-Saharan Africa, and the popularity of telephonic social media applications over the computer-based Internet, which was seen to be too expensive and investment heavy. Internet World Stats reported in 2018 that 172 million of 191 million active social media users in Africa were using WhatsApp in 2017. In Rwanda the mobile phone penetration rate was estimated at 72% of the population while Internet use was 35%. As research

has shown, translanguaging practice has become increasingly common and the examples analysed in Rwanda included English, French, Kinyarwanda and Kiswahili in the same message. It is also interesting that in a materials project we recently developed for Francophone Africa, our team had to prepare lesson plans for teachers to deliver by WhatsApp as well as face-to-face or through the Internet.

Not only WhatsApp but other applications such as Facebook, YouTube, Twitter, Instagram, Skype, LinkedIn, IMO and Messenger are all commonly used in translanguaging communication. The book shows how translanguaging can raise the profile and status of indigenous languages such as Ewe in Ghana in West Africa and promote multilingualism and support heritage language learning. It also explores the value of online phone applications in raising international awareness of women's rights through the network of Eritrean women (RENEW), the role of the African Storybook project in encouraging identity, language and literacy among schoolchildren and the use of WhatsApp poetry groups in Malawi. A final paper analyses the facial responses of students of English as a second language in Nigeria and how they respond to English instructions issued first by a computer interface and then by a human instructor.

What does all this amount to? In conclusion, above all, the editors say this amounts to change. The pandemic has forced all governments to be heavily dependent on information and communi-

cation technologies. What is clear, and especially in the book, is the relationship between technology and language dominance. English and European languages dominate as Internet languages. These languages may not be appropriate for the creation and transmission of indigenous knowledge. Indigenous languages are already in danger in many parts of the world as a result of the dominance of mainstream national and international languages. The accelerated use of communication through technology puts indigenous and minority languages at risk of extinction and stresses the role of digital platforms as a basis for revival. In addition, the book shows how digital communication in indigenous languages can enhance rapport and build social integration, especially through the use of translanguaging practices.

As Kirsty Rowan points out in the book, digital technology enables the expression of diverse ideas, broader participation in national and international dialogue and preserving endangered languages and multilingualism as a resource. Digital translanguaging offers the opportunity for indigenous language forms to cross boundaries and create cross-pollination of indigenous languages with European-based lingua francas.

Theoretically and through its research examples *Rethinking Language Use in Digital Africa* is of value not just to students of language and society in Africa but to researchers interested in the theory and practice of digital communication and the study of minority languages around the world.

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