

# LANGUAGE PROFICIENCY , CITIZENSHIP AND PARTICIPATION IN AFRICA

Ericka A. Albaugh – Working Paper – August 2015

## ABSTRACT

African states are known for their linguistic diversity. Few have spread a single official language widely through their education systems. The presence of many local languages seems a benefit in terms of minority rights, but some fear that fragmentation may inhibit national cohesion and democratic participation. This article examines the language competence of individuals in ten states in Africa, highlighting distinctions in types of educational systems. It also assesses their attitudes about citizenship and democracy, using barometer surveys. It shows that immersion systems are much more effective in spreading a standard language, but citizenship attitudes have very little to do with proficiency in this official language. It also reveals that citizens armed with literacy in local languages tend to be more participatory, demanding of greater accountability in government, and more critical of authoritarian rule.

African states are notorious for their poor education outcomes (UNESCO 2013, “Zimbabwe” 2013, “South Africa” 2013). While virtually all have chosen a European language as the official language of education, proficiency in these languages within states across the continent is only about 20 percent on average. Certainly, there is variation, but very few states have managed to spread a standard language through education. The fact is that many local languages have been preserved; the question is what this means for citizenship and democracy.

This article will do three things: First, it will investigate the proficiency in European languages across the continent, and highlight the factors that make individuals more likely to speak these official languages. Second, it will show how language proficiency and type of education affect citizens’ national sentiments compared to ethnic attachments. Finally, it will ask how these factors affect individuals’ political participation and democratic attitudes.

The findings are, unsurprisingly, that higher levels of education bring greater proficiency in European languages. Assessing different types of education, the study finds that individuals schooled in immersion versus initial mother-tongue medium settings are more likely to learn European languages. And yet, proficiency in this official language has ambivalent effects on individuals’ sentiments toward their ethnic group and nation. National sentiment is strong within mother tongue systems as well as immersion systems, but in mother tongue settings, however, citizens maintain attachments to their ethnic identity while the same individuals declaring loyalty to the nation, whereas citizens in immersion settings more readily drop the ethnic attachment. Finally, mother tongue settings appear to provide some advantages when it comes to national sentiment.

dangers of ethnolinguistic fragmentation, which has been blamed for poor economic outcomes and for violent conflict.

While casual observers usually equate ethnolinguistic fragmentation with higher violence, careful work has isolated specific configurations that lead to greater conflict. Horowitz attributes greater violence potential to settings with two or three large groups (1985/2000, 37-38). Bates shows that ethnic politics is most volatile when an ethnic group is sufficient in size to permanently exclude others from the exercise of power (1999, 26, also Collier and Hoeffler 1998). Others have focused on institutional arrangements that provide more or less exclusive identification (Posner 2005). And what appears to be ethnic violence has instead to depend on land scarcity, interregional inequality, and the provocation or protection provided by the state's security apparatus. Language on its own is not usually treated separately, with the notable exception of Laitin (2000), who found in a global sample that language differentiation (the distance between language families) was in fact related to violence. Language grievances, because they can be accommodated within political bargaining, seem to inspire protest, rather than violence (2000, 108). This kind of testing treats language identities as static, however, only expecting differentiation based on size and linguistic distinction among groups.

My question is more specific. I am trying to discover whether the differences in education systems – established by colonizers and largely continued through the independence period to the 90s – have had different effects on identities. Does a particular language policy, the use of mother tongues in education – contribute over the long term to the creation of insular groups with rebellious tendencies? The mechanism would be that groups become more “ideologized,” in the

---

<sup>1</sup> Easterly and Levine 1997; Alesina and Wacziarg 1997; Easterly 1999; Collier and Gunther 1999; Rodrik 1999; Keefer and Knack 2002. Even studies using more nuanced fractionalization measures concur that linguistic fractionalization (Alesina et al 2003 167) and politicized ethnic diversity (Posner 2004) go hand in hand. But see Habyarimana, Humphreys, Posner and Weinstein 2007.

words of Young (1976, 45), they would become (sub)nationalist, and therefore more likely to rebel against state repression and demand autonomy. Previous work (Albaugh 2014, Ch. 7) found that violence was in fact more prevalent among communities in which local language education was privileged. Resonating with the work of Horowitz and Bates, violent mobilization over language has to do with the potential for permanent inequality that can arise if one group's language is chosen and others are not. Therefore, mother tongue education would only contribute to conflict insofar as it reinforces the privilege of a particular group that enjoyed an early head start. Where this has occurred – Sudan, Malawi, and Uganda to some extent – there have been rumblings from excluded groups. But by in large, mother tongue education has been more inclusive than exclusive, which is why it generally has not been linked to violence.

Even if scholarship has found that violent outcomes are only at risk where there is great intergroup inequality or permanent exclusion, it is worth knowing how education policies impact citizens' sense of national identity. Ali Mazrui notes that the recognition of chiefdoms and native rulers in Anglophone Africa helped to increase ethnic consciousness within subgroups, reducing the likelihood of an emerging national consciousness. British approaches to colonial rule, by being culturally relative and ethnically specific, helped to perpetuate and in some cases create the kind of ethnic consciousness which could seriously militate against nation building" (Mazrui 1983, 29). The paper will therefore look at whether this increased attention to ethnic identity through mother tongue education indeed prevented the emergence of national sentiment.

A second strand of literature includes normative and practical theories about language policies in education. These literatures often overlap, as empirical arguments seem to follow normative predispositions. Normatively, the question is whether the goal should be uniformity or diversity. Those who advocate for uniformity argue that national unity and inclusive participation is best served when all speak the same language (Pogge 2003, Blake 2003, Archibugi 2005). Those

who advocate for diversity argue that inclusivity with recognition of minorities, and the imposition of a single language threatens to undermine unity (Phillipson 2008, Ives 2010, May 2012). These latter theorists similarly argue that the immersion method will enhance participation: namely that mother tongue education, by rectifying unchosen inequalities, will allow minority voices to be heard. Practically speaking, those who advocate uniformity argue that immersion is the most efficient way for minorities to learn a common language, while those advocating diversity say that the use of the mother tongue is not only more inclusive, but it is more effective for teaching a second language in the long run (Colin Thomas 2004, Wong-Fillmore 2004).

Of course, there is more nuance to these pos

to the majority language. This efficiency argument can be reconciled with the nation-state model, but it is often rejected by purists as being “covert linguicide” (May 2012, 181). The “local language light” argument, as I call the *transliterator*, has gained traction in much of Francophone Africa, while the more demanding *exit* programs have been more difficult to maintain or expand, despite their apparent benefits for learning the majority language (Heugh 2006, 69-70).

It may be that the disingenuous practice of “l

elites' participation, as it allowed them to join national or international conversations. The "masses," however, are still excluded. Alternative visions are available to the audience that matters. This problem is echoed more recently by Ives (2010) who points out that the apparently "natural" decision to learn a global language may submerge consciousness and hinder the struggles of the marginalized to recognize their oppression.

This article therefore will look beyond the part of mother tongue education on language acquisition, assessing its impact on citizens' attitudes and political participation.

African states are often compared unfavorably with the nation-state that arose in Europe (Herbst 2000). Whether one blames or credits it, one of its central elements was language standardization. The lack of attention to standardization is evident in the following figure, which plots the European-language proficiency with states in Africa. These are estimates based on several expert sources.

FIGURE 1

---

<sup>6</sup> Among the general sources: Adebayo (1994), Graddol (1997), Baker and Jones (1998), OIF (2007), Leclerc (2009-2011). Sources for individual countries listed in the appendix to Albaugh 2014.

Aside from two exceptional cases, Gabon, and ~~Algeria~~ French and English retain a



therefore turned to the Afrobarometer surveys to gauge both proficiency and possible contributing variables. These surveys ask a battery of questions to 2400 respondents from each country.

To look at individuals' actual facility in speaking a unifying language, I profited in particular from one open-ended question in the Afrobarometer surveys. This question (Q88E) asked respondents to list the languages they spoke well. By aggregating the respondents by their exposure to education and their facility in a European language, one can see how effective the education system in the country has been in the goal of diffusing the official language. While far from perfect, the biases would be similar across all of the respondents. I coded these free responses into a 0/1 variable, 1 indicating that the respondent listed English, French, or Portuguese among the languages he or she spoke well. Though surveys are available for 20 countries, I restricted my selection to the 10 most representative cases for my purposes: in particular, those that most consistently demonstrated the "Francophone" and "Anglophone" approach to education, prior to some shifts in the last decade. I also include Mozambique as a representative of Portuguese policy, more similar to the former cases in its non-use of local languages. Historically, British colonies and the independent states that succeeded them relied on local languages in early education, while French and Portuguese colonies and subsequent states generally used these European languages from the beginning of primary school (Albaugh 2014, Ch. 2). In the last 15 years, many Francophone and Lusophone states shifted to the use of local languages, but adults surveyed in 2008 would have been in the original systems: typically mother tongue for Anglophone and immersion for Francophone and Lusophone.

The following 10 countries make up the sample: Uganda, Zimbabwe, Nigeria, Kenya, Ghana (Anglophone/mother tongue education); Benin, Burkina Faso, Mali, Senegal (Francophone/immersion) and Mozambique (Portuguese/immersion).

Findings: European Language Proficiency

This finding mirrors the continual observation of a low literacy rate in Francophone states, and it has often led to a disparaging assessment of the French system of education – the use of French rather than local languages as medium of instruction. It has probably led to these states' willingness to consider other methods. But that may not be the appropriate interpretation.

The Afrobarometer surveys attempt to include a representative sample of the population in each country as possible. Because literacy rates in Anglophone Africa are much higher than in Francophone Africa (average rates among these five countries are 76 percent versus 36 percent for the Francophone countries), a random sample will likely capture a higher percentage of educated respondents in surveys done in Anglophone Africa. In fact, the average percentage of survey respondents with some education was 87 percent in Anglophone Africa versus 43 percent in Francophone Africa – twice as many respondents had exposure to some education in the former as in the latter. We need, then, to account for level of education.

As further controls, we want to include some demographic variables. Considering the diversity of language groups in these states, it would be reasonable to expect that individuals from small language groups would have more incentive to learn a European language to increase their communication potential, compared with individuals from large language groups, who already have more communication partners (de Swaan 2001). I calculated this variable based on language size figures from Ethnologue, adjusting the numbers to 2010 estimates. "Size of Respondent's Language Group" is the portion of the country's overall population that speaks the respondent's language as a mother tongue. It is predicted that individuals from smaller indigenous groups will be less likely to need to learn a second language. I also include an urban/rural dummy, believing that urbanization

---

<sup>9</sup> I constructed this measure based on data gleaned from Ethnologue Language World 6<sup>th</sup> edition ([www.ethnologue.com](http://www.ethnologue.com)), calculating group language size as a proportion of overall population (adjusting to 2010 estimates as necessary). The Afrobarometer languages had to be carefully matched to the Ethnologue languages, which were often named differently (this was possible because alternate names are listed in Ethnologue). I also aggregated languages that were split in Ethnologue, such as Dogon varieties in Mali or languages listed as members of the Oluluyia (Luhya) macrolanguage in Kenya.

should increase one's exposure to a European language should the fact of being male. Finally, I expect that young people are more likely to be learning European languages through greater interaction with media. Values for these five variables are taken from the Afrobarometer 2008 responses.

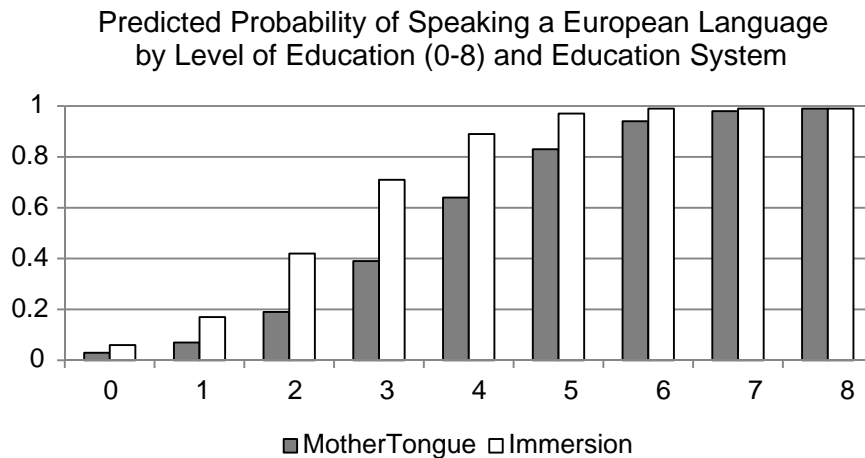
The following Logit regression results support

-2 log likelihood:	12438.371	11843.660	11269.881
--------------------	-----------	-----------	-----------

\*\* Significant at the .001 level

Model 2 adds a dummy for type of education system – 0 for immersion and 1 for mother tongue. It indicates that mother tongue settings are less likely to produce individuals who claim proficiency in a European language given any level of education. The following figure separates respondents by level of education to show the distinction in predicted probabilities:

FIGURE 3



Considering only the level of education and the mother tongue or immersion settings, it is clear that at every level, individuals in Francophone or Lusophone states are more likely to speak a European language. After two years of education, for example, individuals in Anglophone states are half as likely (19%) to say they can speak English well than individuals in Francophone states to say they can speak French well (42%). The gap narrows as education increases, particularly after the fourth grade, when Anglophone states would typically make the transition to all English. After five years of education, individuals in Anglophone states have a 83 percent probability of saying they speak English well, compared to 97 percent in Francophone or Lusophone states. Finally, with seven years of education, the probability becomes nearly equal, at 98 and 99 percent. This seems to confirm the warning that early-exit programs are the least effective method of imparting a second language. Model 3 adds the demographic controls, confirming that larger-sized groups are less likely

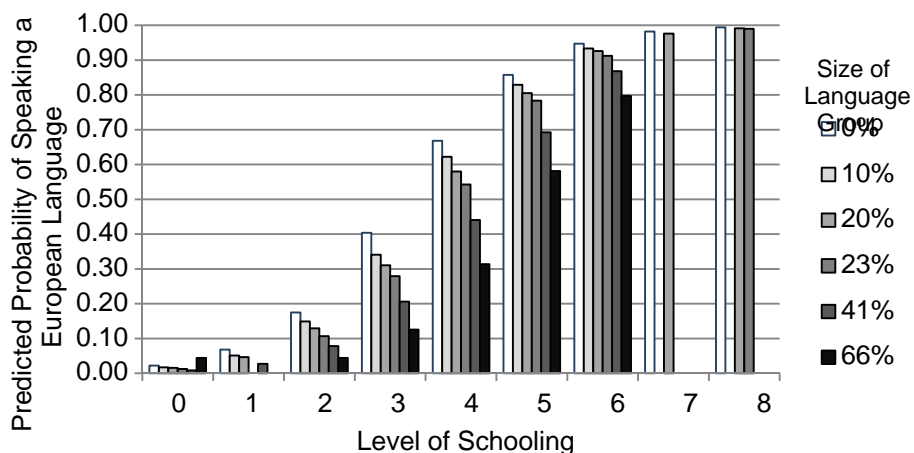
to speak a European language, while males and those in urban areas are more likely to. Age has an almost negligible effect. We can check the effects of education in each setting while

less likely a member will speak a European language. Rural women from very tiny language groups have a 44 percent probability, whereas those from the very largest groups have only 20 percent probability. After four years of education, the gap is narrower, but still pronounced: women from very tiny groups have 88 percent probability, compared to 71 percent for those from the very largest groups. Above six years of schooling, the size of group does not change the probability, which is about 99 percent across the board.

Comparing these findings to mother tongue education settings, we see the same patterns, but with lower probabilities overall. With two years of education in mother tongue settings, rural women from tiny groups have only 17 percent probability of speaking English, and those from the very largest groups only 4 percent. After four years of education, women from very small groups have 67 percent probability, compared to 31 percent for those in the very largest groups. It is only after seven years of schooling that the gap seems to shrink.

FIGURE 5

Rural Women in Mother Tongue Systems



It seems evident that immersion does a better job of teaching people to speak a European language. As explained at the outset, the proficiency remains so low in Francophone settings

is that a smaller proportion of the population ~~has~~ enrolled since the colonial period. Literacy







FIGURE 10

These figures show a clearly different effect of education on citizenship sentiments between these sets of countries. Education in Francophone states, while perhaps more effective at teaching French (even if limited in spread), seems to ask



along with urban and male categorization, in the regression cases within Models 2 and 3. Age does not seem to play a role, and individuals from certain language groups are weakly more inclined to identify with the nation. Speaking a European language, while barely significant, seems correlated with less identification with the nation.

The Mother Tongue education cases (highlighted) behave very differently. First, education

## FIGURE 11

These figures and regression results point to a central role for education in each setting. Immersion systems have indeed done a lot of spreading a European language. And these education systems do increase individuals' attachment to the nation over their ethnic identity, but

equal citizenship affording citizens considerable protection from arbitrary state action as well as significant collective control over the personnel decisions of government” (Tilly 1997, 246). In situations where ‘big man rule’ has become the norm, it is important to identify citizens’ ability to question this patrimonialism. I selected five questions from Afrobarometer survey, two pointing toward participation and three indicating democratic attitudes. I discuss each briefly below and then run simple OLS regressions to see what variables correlate with these outcomes.

First, proclivity toward political participation can be seen in individuals’ belief that they can get together to make their local assembly listen to their grievances (Question 24A).





18 percent said they agreed that opposition should regularly examine and criticize government; and 21 percent said they strongly agreed that opposition should examine and criticize.

The following series of OLS regressions show association of the outcomes with the



with others to make an assemblyman listen, all of these results point to the superiority of mother tongue education settings for participation and democratic attitudes.

Finally, an additional question from Afrobarometer probed respondents' sentiments about democracy (Question 40A), asking people to choose what they thought should be the most important national priority among several options. These options were 1: maintaining order in the nation, 2: giving people more say in government, 3: protecting people's right to live freely, and 4: improving economic conditions for the poor. The following figures show the percentage of respondents in each country who chose each option as the highest national priority. The largest proportion of respondents chose "improve the economy" as the most important national priority. One might expect this to correlate with need, though GDP per capita in the year of the survey did not show a consistent pattern.

Closer to the purpose of the paper, we want to know what proportion selected outcomes associated with democracy. Figure 12 clearly shows that individuals in the mother tongue systems are registering more interest in democracy. The percentage of respondents who want more protection of freedom is highest in Zimbabwe, perhaps not surprising given Zimbabwe's abysmal Freedom House score. Yet even citizens in very democratic Ghana complain about freedom at a higher rate than three of the democratic Francophone cases.

FIGURE 12

The distinction is even more pronounced when looking at the percentage of citizens who want more say in their government (Fig. 13). The most democratic Anglophone cases – Ghana and Kenya – have more demands for participation than any of the Francophone cases.

FIGURE 13

## Conclusion

Scholars have long observed that British colonization left a firmer foundation for democracy (Bernard, Reenock and Nordstrom 2004; Agben Johnson and Robinson 2002; Woodberry 2012;

all following earlier theorists such as Lipset and Torres 1993). This has variously been attributed to good institutions, geography, or Protestant missions.

This paper has looked specifically at the type of education and its role in language acquisition, citizenship and democratic attitudes. It has found that immersion settings – elitist and limited as they are – do a better job of instilling language proficiency in school-leavers. And these schools more uniformly create citizens with stronger national versus ethnic sentiment.

Rather than creating the opposite, citizens attached more firmly (and perhaps dangerously)



Education Level	.228 (.039)	1.256
Size of Language Group	-.001 (.003)	.999
Rural	-.242 (.110)	.785
Female	-.521 (.098)	.594
Do not Speak a Europ. Language	.422 (.141)	1.525
Age	-.001 (.000)	

Education Level	.067 (.034)	1.070
Size of Language Group	.006 (.002)	1.006
Rural	-.048 (.117)	.953
Female	.101 (.104)	1.106
Do not Speak a Europ. Language	-.385 (.134)	.680

“national identity only” because they feel that in a sense they “own” the state’s national identity. Finally, the inability to speak English reduce the likelihood of choosing 3, 4, or 5 in these mother tongue settings. Those unable to communicate in English feel less attachment to the nation than their ethnic group.







May, Stephen (2012) "Language, Education and Minority Rights" *Language and Minority Rights: Ethnicity, Nationalism and the Politics of Language*, 2<sup>nd</sup> Edition, Cambridge University Press, pp. 1-15.

