

# Introduction: Language, Structure and Agency: Optimising Media Diversity in Africa Using the Indigenous Languages

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Language plays a crucial role in the media as a key public domain, to the extent that the languages people use in the media determine their chances of getting heard. However, there are numerous forces determining which languages are used in the public domain and the hierarchy of their deployment. This point has been debated extensively in the literature of language ideology. In her seminal work in this area, Woolard (1992, pp. 235–236), for instance, suggests that to the extent that language is the vehicle of large proportions of media content, it is linked to expression and to power. According to Woolard, “language stands in dialectical relation with, and thus significantly influences, social, discursive and linguistic practices”. There also exists a dialectical relationship between language attitudes and the roles different languages are assigned in the public domain. Because of the important role of language, this relationship constitutes an important issue for discussion in the context of the media’s role in inclusion and exclusion and in the overall democratisation project in Africa. Political economy scholars have for over two decades made the same point about the relationship/s between language, diversity, expression and democracy (see, for instance Golding and Murdock 1991; Goldsmith Media Group 2000; Gurevitch 2000; McChesney 2000; Bagdikian 2014). Curran’s seminal argument (1991, p. 23) has been fundamental to this argument. He says:

A basic requirement of a democratic media system should be that it represents all significant interests in society. It should facilitate their participation in the public domain, enable them to contribute to public debate and have an input in the framing of public policy. The media should also represent the functioning of representative

organisations and expose their internal processes to public scrutiny and the play of public opinion. In short a central role of the media should be defined as assisting the equitable negotiation or arbitration of competing interests through democratic processes.

There is no denying that language plays a key role in facilitating this kind of participation as it enables people to express themselves in ways that most represent their views and experiences. This book seeks to place indigenous language media in Africa in a particular socio-historical context with a view to highlighting their role in enhancing Africans' political participation and cultural expression in their local environs.

Typically, the roles African languages play in the public domain in Africa have been linked to colonial policies of marginalisation, and to a large extent, accepted as the norm. Thus, by force of historical circumstance, it is believed that certain sections of the population in Africa have had privileged access to public information and expression because of their linguistic competencies. While it is important to look at language competence and access as structurally conditioned, one must also pay attention to agency: the language choices that individuals or communities make at the micro level in spite of policy, colonial history and other structural factors. Such choices can work hand in hand with structural factors to enhance the kind of participation that increases chances of political participation and cultural expression. Thus, beyond seeing African peoples as victims of language hegemony, both at micro and macro levels, this book is interested in considering human agency in the choice and use of language in the media. The point here is that people can actually be protagonists of cultural assertiveness through the promotion of their local languages in ways that are innovative. In this book we examine the manner and the extent to which the indigenous languages continue to be deployed in liberalised media environments by government, civil society and individuals in Africa, and the impact of this. Thus, while the book grapples with the language of politics, it also considers the *politics of language*, that is, the motives behind the choice of languages used in the political and cultural domains.

It is true that the politics of language in Africa today is, to a great extent, part of the legacy of colonialism (see for instance, Bamgbose 1991; Mamdani 2001; Salhi 2002; du Plessis 2011; Meeuwis 2011). Meeuwis (2011) in particular presents an insightful analysis of different