

**Minority linguistic rights vs national/ regional language policies in Southern Africa: a need for a nuanced approach lest English wins all**

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*The present world-wide focus on minorities rights emphasizes that any community is entitled to the use of its own language, in particular in education.*

*Africa is a continent characterized by linguistic diversity, which has been further compounded by a tradition that often posits close varieties as languages in their own right. African independent countries have maintained as official languages what were initially colonial languages.*

*In Southern Africa, some languages, spoken by a majority in a given country, have been widely developed - this is the case for Shona & Ndebele in Zimbabwe, Chewa in Malawi, Tswana in Botswana. This policy, incepted during colonial times, was pursued after Independence. As a result, these languages, often referred to as 'national', are used to various degrees in education, have a significant literature, are represented in the print and audio media, and the number of their speakers as L1 and/or L2 is probably increasing.*

*More often than not, 'national' languages happen to be those of the political post-Independence leaderships. Minority language speakers are often forced to learn, and sometimes resort to, the 'national' language, or face marginalisation.*

*Denouncing what they perceive as cultural and linguistic assimilation, and articulating the language rights paradigm, some linguists from the region advocate for minority languages to be afforded the same status as the 'national' language(s), particularly in education.*

*For all its merits, such a position begs a crucial question: what linguistic future is envisaged for the countries of the region?*

*Is it a diglossic situation whereby a local language is used for initial literacy but remains restricted to low prestige functions, giving way to English for all else? or one where African languages play a significant role in modern domains, such as secondary education, techniques, trade, literature, etc?*

*If the latter, given the efforts required and the costs involved coupled to the scarcity of both material and human resources, and the empirical fact that any written output in a language needs to have a sufficient potential audience to be meaningful, we argue that it is necessary to admit that, in each country, there is room for the full development of only a few languages. This should be made clear to minority language speakers. The situation, in our view, calls for a multi-tier language policy à la Nigérienne, or à l'Indienne, with, as the case may be, a local language for initial literacy, a national or regional language further up the education ladder and for internal matters, and (arguably) English for international communications.*