

## Chapter 4

# Multilingualism and Multiculturalism: Why Africa Is Different

**Bert van Pinxteren**

 <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-3387-923X>

*Leiden University, The Netherlands*

### **ABSTRACT**

*This chapter examines specifics of African contexts relevant for teaching in multilingual and multicultural environments. It starts with basics, pointing to a toxic cocktail of ideas that may have value in the North, but is counterproductive in Africa. Thus, it examines ideas of ‘language’ as applied to Africa proposing to distinguish between discerned and designed languages. If participation in education increases a transition to using a limited number of designed languages as medium of instruction will become necessary and possible. This will overcome the current diglossic situation dominated by former colonial languages. On culture, the chapter proposes a non-essentialist definition. Recent research shows that the old ‘tribal’ categories have lost their meaning in many (though not all) parts of Africa. An appreciation is needed of the new cultural traditions that are emerging on the continent. Understanding Africa’s specificity will lead to a new research agenda and to new ideas on what teaching and learning in Africa’s multilingual and multicultural environments mean.*

### **INTRODUCTION**

Teaching in a multicultural and multilingual context is likely to be different, depending on different contexts. Most research and most publications in this area are written by and for an audience that is familiar mostly with Northern contexts and applicable to teaching in such a context. Thus, in many cases, a situation is taken as a frame of reference whereby speakers of a previously underprivileged language seek to emancipate themselves and gain the same privileges as speakers of the more privileged language (such as the French speakers in Quebec in Canada, who seek the same rights enjoyed by the English-speaking majority). A different Northern perspective could be a situation in which the arrival of new

DOI: 10.4018/978-1-6684-5034-5.ch004

immigrants poses challenges to an educational system that was previously geared only to speakers of the dominant language, such as in countries of Western Europe. In these cases, the challenge is to ensure that all cultures are respected, and that people get equal treatment. What these contexts have in common is that in the dominant system, the cultural and linguistic rights of the speakers of the dominant language are guaranteed. The problem is one of extending similar rights to minority groups that currently do not have such rights or whose rights are currently restricted. Academic research and discourse focus on how this can be done.

For Africa, the context is a radically different one and this should lead to a different starting point for research and debate. This is where this chapter hopes to make a contribution. A key feature of African contexts is the *diglossic* situation that prevails in much of the continent: a former colonial language that is not indigenous to the country and is usually not spoken as mother tongue or L1 by many people in the country is nevertheless used as the medium of instruction in education and dominates in administration and other domains. This means that in most African countries, speakers of large (sometimes majority) languages do not have the rights that are afforded speakers of majority languages elsewhere in the world. This is a basic injustice, as pointed out for example by Skuttnab-Kangas (2013).

The same is true, in a different and more obscure way, for the area of culture. In most countries outside of Africa, cultural differences are clearly marked; usually, they are congruent with linguistic differences. In Africa, that is not the case: the old, precolonial markers of difference no longer apply or apply only partially, but there is no clarity on what has come in its stead. Authors such as Ake (1993) and Vansina (1992) have pointed to this problematic area. On the ground, it is clear that most Africans peacefully negotiate their existence in multilingual and multicultural environments. Yet we also see much-publicized cases of ethnically inspired strife and violence. In many cases, the existence of such different cultural identities is downplayed or outright denied, in favour of a more 'modern' but sometimes artificial 'national' identity.

This means that both in cultural and linguistic terms, the indigenous peoples of Africa (basically: almost all Africans) lack the rights that indigenous peoples elsewhere are hoping to get and that have been recognized by various United Nations (UN) agencies. However, this state of affairs, one that is very damaging for Africa, is hidden from sight by what I would call a *toxic cocktail of ideas* on language and culture in Africa that work together to paint a picture of the continent as static and unchanging and that severely limit African agency. A decolonial approach to teaching and learning in a multilingual and multicultural context that is specific to Africa has to start by deconstructing this cocktail: we need to re-examine the basic terms and concepts we use in light of African realities and build a new analysis based on such a re-examination. To do that, the following sections look at the area of language and multilingualism, then at the area of culture and multiculturalism. A last concluding section examines the links between the two as applied to Africa and attempts a brief discussion of the consequences of this re-examination for teaching and learning.

## **LANGUAGE AND MULTILINGUALISM**

None of the concepts used in this area can be applied uncritically when it comes to Africa. So before talking about multilingualism, we first need to look at the concept of 'language' and how it is applied in Africa. To find a way forward out of the dominant disempowering discourse, we propose to make use of the distinction between *discerned* and *designed* languages.

13 more pages are available in the full version of this document, which may be purchased using the "Add to Cart" button on the publisher's webpage:  
[www.igi-global.com/chapter/multilingualism-and-multiculturalism/310729](http://www.igi-global.com/chapter/multilingualism-and-multiculturalism/310729)

## Related Content

---

### Common Errors in Teacher-Made Test Design

Michael Fields (2019). *Handbook of Research on Assessment Literacy and Teacher-Made Testing in the Language Classroom* (pp. 328-346).

[www.irma-international.org/chapter/common-errors-in-teacher-made-test-design/217160](http://www.irma-international.org/chapter/common-errors-in-teacher-made-test-design/217160)

### Making Educator Professional Development More Accessible and Inclusive With Mobile Teacher: A Global Community of Practice Founded in Appreciative Inquiry

Katherine Guevara (2022). *TESOL Guide for Critical Praxis in Teaching, Inquiry, and Advocacy* (pp. 453-467).

[www.irma-international.org/chapter/making-educator-professional-development-more-accessible-and-inclusive-with-mobile-teacher/286952](http://www.irma-international.org/chapter/making-educator-professional-development-more-accessible-and-inclusive-with-mobile-teacher/286952)

### Book Review: Humor Translation in the Age of Multimedia (2021)

Dongmei Zheng (2022). *International Journal of Translation, Interpretation, and Applied Linguistics* (pp. 1-5).

[www.irma-international.org/article/book-review/313923](http://www.irma-international.org/article/book-review/313923)

### Expanding Technology-Based Transcultural Diffusion: Lessons from Brazil and the Philippines

Margee Hume, Paul Johnston, Mark Argarand Craig Hume (2014). *Cross-Cultural Interaction: Concepts, Methodologies, Tools, and Applications* (pp. 1512-1529).

[www.irma-international.org/chapter/expanding-technology-based-transcultural-diffusion/97547](http://www.irma-international.org/chapter/expanding-technology-based-transcultural-diffusion/97547)

### Translator Professionalism: Perspectives From Asian Clients

Christy Fung-ming Liu (2019). *International Journal of Translation, Interpretation, and Applied Linguistics* (pp. 1-13).

[www.irma-international.org/article/translator-professionalism/232227](http://www.irma-international.org/article/translator-professionalism/232227)